

Strange Attraction by orphan_account

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Abusive Parents, Banter, Enemies to Friends, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, Eventual Romance, Family Issues, Fluff and Angst, Homophobic Language, I just have no patience coming up with a better one, I know the title is terrible, M/M, Not sure where I'm going with this, Rating May Change, Slow Burn-ish, Steve Needs a Hug, Tommy and Carol are the worst, Undecided Relationship(s), Underage Drinking, just these three being cute, physical and verbal abuse

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Tommy and Carol, Will Byers

Relationships: Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler

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Summary:

Steve walks back into the room and sees Jonathan standing awkwardly to the side, jacket and boots still on.

“Dude, get those off,” he mutters, getting a bit annoyed at how Jonathan still doesn’t feel comfortable in his house. He doesn’t know why it bothers him so much but he just wants to see the guy loosen up for once. Jonathan’s been over quite a few times, but each visit is like the first, and it takes a good hour before he warms up and starts to relax.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

This is my first time writing Steve and these three together. Also my first time using present tense, so I don't really know if it's any good.

Jonathan slinks lower in his seat and checks his watch. It's a cheap piece, not more than fifteen bucks, that he's had for years, but it tells the time and that's what watches were for, right? Eight minutes to go. He managed to snag a pretty good spot in math class at least; third seat, last row. Nice and inconspicuous, just how he liked it.

"Byers!"

Oh shit! What now?

"You heard what I said?" Niece's tone is threatening and Jonathan knows what's coming. "Get up here."

He knows it's useless to argue so he gets up; that awkward thing happens where he bumps into the front of his desk as he tried to stand, causing the whole thing to shift forward a couple of centimeters, with a tinny squeak that sounds harsher than it should in the classroom that's suddenly gone silent. He shuffles to the front of the room, hands buried in the deep pockets of his faded jacket; he wears clothes with pockets, more often than not, for just this reason. He feels uncomfortable enough without his arms swinging stupidly at his side, like a lumbering gorilla.

"Care to demonstrate?" Niece smirks, handing him a piece of chalk.

There's a second where his hand won't leave his pocket, so he yanks it out, rather violently and grabs the piece from his teacher's hand, cracking it. He bends down to pick up the broken bits, trying to ignore the sniggering that's buzzing in his ears. It seems like an eternity before he straightens up and takes a look at the question he's supposed to be doing.

Piece of cake...

He was honestly okay with trigonometry and algebra, unlike most. Chemistry was where his mind really clammed up, and he struggled to maintain a passing grade.

Jonathan starts writing at a furious pace. *Get this over, just get this over...* Thirty seconds late, he's done, and on his way back to his seat.

"Byers! I told you to use the quadratic formula, not to complete the square."

"I didn't hear that," he mutters, pausing and glancing back. He's glaring and he knows he is, but he's just not in the mood of dealing with his vindictive math teacher. Not today at least.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah...you'll do questions..." Niece consults the textbook. "...5 through 15 for tomorrow, no excuses. Got it?"

He nods once, irritably, and completes the long journey back to his seat, just as the bell rings. Jonathan grabs his stuff and makes a mad dash out to the parking lot, thankful that the area around his car seems to be unoccupied. He gets into the beat-up Ford, starts it, and shifts to drive, anxious to make a quick getaway. But that isn't meant to be. There's a tap on the passenger side window and he looks over to see Nancy and Steve peering in at him like he's an exhibit.

What now? This was becoming a theme. They'd taken to ambushing him every chance they got, it seemed. He didn't get it, he really didn't. They'd fought the damn monster together. That was it, in Jonathan's mind, but apparently, it wasn't. They came to the hospital with him that night, they'd waited there for hours as Will was stabilized, and they'd stayed overnight in the waiting room, leaving only to buy food for his mom and him. Nancy, he understood. Sort of. But the Steve aspect perplexed him.

Jonathan had walked back into the waiting room, looking for Nancy, when Steve had gotten up.

"Hey, Byers, can I have a word?"

They'd moved to the hallway where Steve had taken a deep breath

and then launched into a speech.

“Listen, man, I want to apologize for what I said to you yesterday, earlier today, whenever...It, uh, it was way out of line...Disgusts me now, thinking about it, honestly. What I said about your mom and brother, and yourself, I’m sorry. I was an ass.”

“Yeah, you were,” Jonathan had nodded, unsure of what he felt himself. “But you did save our lives back there, so...” he’d held out his hand in what he assumed was an appropriate gesture and they’d shaken hands. And he’d assumed that that was it between the two of them, had hoped it was, honestly, because something about Steve threw him off. He didn’t know if it was the hair, or the cologne, or that ingratiating smile, but something about him was off-putting.

The tapping on the dusty window-pane is becoming more like a pounding, so Jonathan leans over and opens the door (The automatic lock stopped working a long time ago).

“What?” He rubs his eyes, trying to get the two to leave him alone.

Steve forces the door open all the way and slips inside, as though Jonathan had just given him a warm invitation. “So, we’re going over to my place to study, for that chemistry test. Wanna come? Nance seems to think that the only way we get any actual ‘studying’ done, is if you’re there...”

Nancy comes around to his side, where the window is open and leans in, resting her arms on the window frame.

Oh God, now they’re flanking me...

Jonathan sighs and looks over at Steve. “What time? Because I gotta get home and take a nap first, I’m on four hours of sleep right now.”

Before answering, Steve winks at Nancy. “That’s a record, Byers. Took just two minutes to convince you. Your average is at about half an hour, I’d say.”

Jonathan rolls his eyes, impatiently. “Don’t make me change my mind, Harrington.”

Now it's Nancy's turn to roll her eyes. When they start using each other's last name is when she has to intervene, or they'd carry on that way forever. "Okay...seriously, about seven, right?" She looks at Steve for affirmation.

He nods quickly but makes no move to leave the car.

"You're in my car," Jonathan says dully, a moment later.

"Really, Byers? No shit! You'll go far with that head of yours."

Jonathan inhales deeply and then blows the air out slowly, before turning to Steve. "What do you want?"

"If you ask nicely I'll tell you."

Nancy can see Jonathan's frustration growing. Over the past few months, she noticed this pattern in him, how he had a hard time differentiating between someone teasing him playfully and spitefully. He'd walked off on them a couple of times, much to Steve's chagrin, when the bantering had taken a wrong turn and Nancy wasn't about to let that happen here.

"Steve, come on, we need to go," She says loudly. "I've got a couple of things I want to pick up."

Steve is oblivious to Nancy's tactics and grins cheekily at Jonathan before exiting the car and looping his arm around her.

I'm gonna need to have a talk with him about this, Nancy thinks, Or else, things are gonna go south between them.

Steve heads out to the Harrington garage (6 cars, if you were wondering), and finds his stash of beer, which he keeps inside a wobbly stack of spare tires that haven't been used in years. He's running low and makes a mental note to let his contact know; said 'contact' is just his cousin, but he refers to the guy as a 'contact' to

keep it dangerous sounding.

After hauling a twelve-pack into his freezer, Steve collapses on the couch and looks over at Nancy who seems to be organizing...color-coded notes...?

“What the hell, Nance? Are those color-coded?”

“Yeah...” She sounds guilty.

He’s laughing before she can defend herself and soon she’s whacking him on the hips with those very same notes.

“To think I’d date a girl who color-codes her notes...” Steve muses when they’ve calmed down. For some reason, this statement makes Nancy think of Jonathan and her resolution from earlier.

“Steve. I need to talk to you about how you handle Jonathan,” she says firmly, letting him know that this is not in jest.

“Whayamean?” He garbles back at her, his eyes wide and his mouth stuffed with popcorn.

She opens her mouth to speak when a car grinds to a halt on the gravel outside. Nancy jumps up and goes to open the door before Jonathan has to ring the bell.

“Hi,” she smiles.

“Yeah, hi,” His hair is mussed and his eyes look squinty like he just woke up.

“You sleep well?”

“Yeah, a little too well, overslept,” Jonathan says and follows her inside. He feels the familiar sensation of detachment that comes each time he enters Steve’s house. It’s one of not belonging, of an outsider looking in, like a waiter at some extravagant party. Everything, from the leather couches to the heavy velvet curtains, just screams wealth, and that’s something that Jonathan is unfamiliar and uncomfortable with. He doubts there’s even a scrap of leather to be found in his house.

Steve is sprawled out on the couch, stuffing his face with microwave popcorn, but jumps up when he sees Jonathan.

“Lemmegoorderapie,” he says heading into the kitchen. While he’s gone, Nancy sets out her notes on the expansive, cream-colored shag rug that spans the Harrington living room.

Steve walks back into the room and sees Jonathan standing awkwardly to the side, jacket and boots still on.

“Dude, get those off,” he mutters, getting a bit annoyed at how Jonathan still doesn’t feel comfortable in his house. He doesn’t know why it bothers him so much but he just wants to see the guy loosen up for once. Jonathan’s been over quite a few times, but each visit is like the first, and it takes a good hour before he warms up and starts to relax.

A few minutes in, and they’re all lounging on the rug, Nancy sitting straight, a thick notebook open in her lap, Steve flat on his back, his arms cushioning his head, and Jonathan leaning against a couch, hugging his knees. Nancy’s talking quickly, going on and on about Le Chatelier’s principle, thermodynamics, and endothermic and exothermic reactions. Steve is quickly losing her, but doesn’t ask her to go back; he’s too busy watching Jonathan who’s listening raptly, occasionally nodding and consulting his own shoddy notes. It’s a little while in when Jonathan takes his flannel shirt off. He’s wearing a plain black t-shirt underneath, that he probably doesn’t even realize is rather skimpy and does a good job of showing off his chest. Steve finds that Nancy’s voice is no more than an indistinct droning in his ears as he continues to stare at Jonathan, his mouth, as he chews on his bottom lip, his eyes, as he scrunches them up in concentration, the muscles in his biceps as he brushes a strand of hair out of his eyes...

Steve has a strange urge to get up and do the last bit himself, but he doesn’t. Instead, he speaks. “You look good in that, Byers.”

Jonathan’s head snaps away from Nancy to focus on him. “What?”

Damn it! Why did I have to say that? And why does Byers always have to make me repeat everything I say? “I said you look good in that,” Steve

says easily, trying to make it seem like a joke. "You need to stop wearing five layers, girls would like you more."

Jonathan blushes and shoots him a furtive smile, before returning to Nancy, who's barely stopped talking.

Steve breathes again, thanking whoever was up there that Jonathan could not read his thoughts and didn't know what that sly smile had done to his stomach (and something else, if he was being honest with himself). He turns away from the other boy and focuses on Nancy instead, letting his mind wander. *What the fuck is wrong with you, Harrington? Is Jonathan Byers really turning you on?! Really? Someone like Conan Mitchell, maybe, but Jonathan Byers?! Steve had kissed a boy once before. It was a joke, really, a prank they were playing on another guy, but he'd realized then that perhaps he didn't mind it as much as he should have. Steve had shoved those thoughts to the back of his head which hadn't really been that hard; he liked girls, and all they had to offer, plenty, and it wasn't like he'd found a guy he'd really wanted to kiss anyway. Until now, that is.*

Before he can help himself, he's back to gazing at Jonathan. He notices more this time too. Jonathan's lips are cracked and there's a faint trickle of blood, on the lower one where he'd been biting himself, that Steve wouldn't mind having smeared on his own. *What the fuck, Steve?! What the actual fuck?! Why do you want Jonathan Byers' blood on your lips?* It isn't the blood, in particular, that he wants. But the blood happens to be located on the younger boy's lips, and Goddammit, but Steve wants those lips under his.

Before he has time to ponder this development further, the doorbell rings, startling all three of them.

"Saved by the bell," Steve calls out, before he can stop himself. He gets up before the other two can ask him what he means by that and goes to answer the door.

"Mark! How ya' doing," Steve is very familiar with all the pizza guys in town. "How much?"

He dishes out a hefty tip and then hauls the box into the living room. "Not on the carpet guys, my parent'll murder me if anything happens

to their 8 billion dollar, authentic Persian rug.”

“Where are they this time?” Nancy says, in between bites.

“Uh, let’s see...” Steve mutters. “My Dad’s overseas, in China, or maybe Japan? Whatever, somewhere in that area. And my Mom’s out in New York, don’t know what for.” There’s a hard edge to his words which he tries to cover up with a laugh. “Surprised they trust me not to wreck the house...”

But Jonathan’s looking at him curiously, and...is that a touch of sympathy? Steve shakes his head and gets up again. He returns with the icy pack of beer and plunks it down on the couch, tossing one each to Nancy and Jonathan.

“I’ll bet the strongest thing Byers has ever drunk is apple juice,” he comments loudly to Nancy as he settles back down on the floor. She laughs and looks at Jonathan who’s got an odd expression on his face. Before they know it, the can in his hand pops open and Jonathan downs the whole thing in one shot.

He’s reaching for another one, when Steve speaks. “Slow down, Winston Churchill.”

Nancy’s head whips around to him. “Did you just reference Winston Churchill?”

“I know my drinkers, Nance,” Steve says, with a casual brush through his voluminous hair. “Supposedly, Churchill impressed Stalin with his drinking capabilities.”

Nancy’s laughing, but Jonathan hasn’t stopped drinking and he downs a second beer and then a third before stopping. Then he gives Steve the smuggest look that ever smugged. At least that’s how Steve labels it in his head. Oddly, it doesn’t irritate him; rather it makes him want to wipe the smirk off the younger boy’s face in a way that would shock him to the core. *Here we go again...*

“So, clearly you’ve had more than apple juice to drink...” Steve manages.

Jonathan’s smirk seems to deepen, if possible. “I’ve been drinking

since before you knew what alcohol was, Harrington.”

Steve feigns surprise, raising his eyebrows to astronomical heights. “Surely you weren’t drinking before being conceived?”

Jonathan can’t help it and bursts into giggles, astonishing the other two. The sound is one of pure mirth, refreshing, and contagious, and soon they’re all laughing.

“Jesus, Byers! It wasn’t that funny,” Steve says when they’ve calmed down. It kills him to say it, though, because he’s rather pleased with himself.

“Hey, I just shoved down thirty-six ounces worth of beer,” Jonathan counters. “Anyway, is Stalin impressed?”

“Dude seriously, where did you learn to guzzle like that?” Steve asks earnestly.

“You need to laugh more, Jonathan,” Nancy comments, returning to her notes. Jonathan acknowledges her with a faint smile and then addresses Steve.

“I meant it. First time I had a beer, I was probably five. The pantry could be empty, but there was always a beer,” his tone is pensive and Steve wonders what he means by it.

Nancy glances between the two boys, intrigued. Jonathan’s looser than she’s ever seen him, probably because of the alcohol, and Steve is listening raptly, an expression on his face that he usually reserves for her, when she’s in a bad temper. She doesn’t want to interfere but it’s getting late and she promised to be home by ten-thirty. “Hey, we still have that test tomorrow and I’m not even halfway through the material...”

Their heads snap back over to her and they both look a little sheepish.

“Sorry,” Jonathan mutters. “Although I doubt I can concentrate now, I’m feeling a little light-headed already.”

“Just talk, Nance. We idiots will listen,” Steve adds, settling down on

a couch. "How'd you get stuck with us anyway? Little miss perfect hanging out with the moronic douche and the town weirdo?" Yes, Steve also has some alcohol in his system.

"You're selling yourself short," Nancy answers earnestly, though she doesn't know why she's trying. They're both a little woozy and not really listening to what she's saying. "I doubt there are two other people in this god-forsaken place who have the guts to battle a monster." They both smile back at her and Nancy marvels at the difference between the two grins; Steve's is broad, toothy, and kind of arrogant, while Jonathan's is unsure and sweet, but they each make her feel good inside.

I love these guys! It hits her suddenly. She's been dating Steve for a few months but it never occurred to her that she actually loved him. And Jonathan...she's learned to care for him, slowly but surely. At first it was just pity, but that quickly turned into respect, then admiration, and now...love.

She glances up to see them exchange a baffled look.

"Uh...we love you too, Nance," Steve offers, his head hanging upside down off the couch he's lounging on.

"I said that out loud, didn't I?" Nancy inquires, feeling a slight blush creeping over her face.

"Yeah, it's fine though," Jonathan adds quietly reaching out a hand and squeezing her shoulder. He's sitting fairly close so she leans over and kisses him on the cheek, scattering the notes in her lap. She can't find it within herself to care, though she knows it means a good ten minutes of re-organizing them. Jonathan looks taken aback but not like he would have a couple of months ago.

When she pulls away from him, Nancy spots Steve's lazy grin and moves over to him. Jonathan is rather surprised when she kisses him, not on the lips, but on the cheek, like him.

"Well, now that we all feel well and cared for, maybe we should actually study a bit," Steve laughs, oddly being the one to bring them back to the task at hand. Nancy settles back down and starts talking

again, quickly gaining traction.

It's on a bathroom break, twenty minutes later that Jonathan and Steve head into the kitchen to warm up some pizza.

"Do you have any spices?" Jonathan asks, leaning against the island carefully, his hands gripping the edge of the counter behind him.

"Uh...I guess," Steve shrugs. "Look around. I don't know where they'd be."

Jonathan rolls his eyes and shakes his head, before gingerly starting to explore the spotless Harrington kitchen.

"What? This isn't my domain, alright?" Steve says, throwing his hands up for effect. "I can operate a microwave, that's about it."

"What are you eating?" Jonathan questions, continuing with his search.

"Aah, ya' know...pizza most nights, frozen stuff...beer," he finishes off, pathetically.

Jonathan turns around, arm extended in middle of reaching for one of those impossibly high shelves that seem useless due to their location. Steve does not fail to notice how his shirt has ridden up and tries his best to avoid looking at the two-inch gap of Jonathan's exposed skin.

"Someone needs to feed you," he says, raising an eyebrow, in what Steve thinks is an attempt at light-heartedness but actually conveys an uncomfortable level of concern.

"Yeah, well...that someone is partying her ass off in the city..." Steve mutters before he can stop himself. He quickly realizes his mistake and dons the foolproof Steve Harrington Grin™ which never fails to throw people off his scent. "I'm a simple man, Byers..." he chuckles, joining in on the spice search.

All Jonathan can think is: *Now I know what those books mean when they talk about someone's smile not reaching their eyes.* But he doesn't comment. "Right, and Freddie Mercury is straight," he says instead,

gesturing at Steve's perfectly coiffed hair.

Steve grins for real this time, though his heart is hammering. *Interesting analogy...is he implying something...* "Some exceptions must be made."

Jonathan makes a scoffing noise as he opens another cabinet. "Here we are..." he mutters, finding the chili powder. He turns back to Steve, "But really, you could come by my place, get some decent food. It's like a damn circus these days anyway, no one will even notice you're there."

"Why, is your Mom a good cook?" Steve asks while hauling himself up on a counter.

Jonathan's got another one of those sly smirks on, the kind that makes Steve's stomach flip, as he answers. "No. I am." He turns back to his slice of pizza, sprinkling some spice on, but whips around a moment later. "But don't tell her I said that."

Steve feels an odd pang in his chest. He doesn't know what it is, but it's painful and difficult to ignore. *The guy actually fucking cares about his mom!* Then a thought so treacherous creeps in that he actually shakes his head and irons a fist over his forehead, in a bid to get rid of it. *I wonder how it would feel if he cared about me that much...*

"Oh, damn it," he's interrupted by Jonathan swearing softly. There's chili powder sprinkled all over Jonathan's hand, the marble countertop, and the slice of pizza. He makes for the paper towels, carelessly rubbing his eye with his right hand, which is covered in hot, red particles. Bad move.

"Shit," he mutters under his breath. "Owowow..." His whole eye is burning up and he winces in pain, rubbing it furiously.

Steve comes over and places a hand on his back, strangely enjoying the feeling of his breathing. "What happened, man?"

"Chili...in my eye," Jonathan manages, as his eye continues to burn and begins tearing up.

"Dude, get some water in that..." Steve leads the younger boy over to

the sink and turns it on, his hand never leaving the other's back. In the deep recesses of Jonathan's mind, he realizes that Steve's handling is far too gentle and that he's far too close, but he has more immediate concerns, like his eye which feels like it's on fire. He scoops up some water and splashes it over his face, repeatedly, until the offending eye calms down enough to think. Steve finds his hand moving on its own and he pats Jonathan's head in a reassuring manner, marveling at the softness of the other boy's sandy hair. His own is always kind of puffy and stiff, perhaps due to all the hair products he uses.

Steve realizes that Jonathan is staring at him oddly, so he covers up his tender display with an extra-aggressive, and definitely, manly slap to the other guy's shoulder area. Jonathan flinches a bit at the sudden forceful gesture, making Steve regret it.

"Sorry," he mutters, turning away, very conscious of the fact that the air seems to be getting hotter by the moment. *God, where is Nance this whole time?*

"Why do you even hang out with me?" The question springs into Jonathan's alcohol-muddled mind and out of his mouth.

"What?" Steve asks, pulling a Jonathan.

"I asked why you hang out with me. A couple months ago you couldn't stand to look at me."

"Damn you, Byers. Talk about subtlety..." Steve attempts to deflect, but Jonathan's gazing at him intently, not letting him off the hook. "Um...I guess I saw the error of my ways..."

"Yeah, but that doesn't change the fact that you couldn't stand me..." Jonathan presses, taking a bite out of his pizza, at last. "What made you suddenly able to tolerate me?"

"Well, you know, we kinda took down a real-life bogeyman together, and I can appreciate a guy who can knock the shit out of me," Steve provides, grinning again.

Jonathan smiles but his eyes are still thoughtfully looking at Steve, as

though unsatisfied with his answer. He's about to speak again, when Nancy walks back in, all business.

Steve brushes a hand over his forehead, wiping away the sweat that's steadily been building up there. *I really need to have a chat with Nance about the length of her bathroom trips...Jesus...*

They study for another twenty minutes, before Nancy calls it quits and gets up. Steve bids the other two good night, watching them pull out of the driveway, feeling a slight pang of jealousy.

Nancy insists on driving because Jonathan is still a little out of it and he doesn't complain. His house is close by and soon they're crunching up the familiar dirt road, coming to a stop alongside Joyce's pinto.

"So, I'll pick you up tomorrow?" she questions, finalizing their plan.

"Yeah, that's good," Jonathan mutters distractedly, making no move to leave the car. "You know, you and Steve don't have to hold back just because I'm around," he bursts out suddenly.

Nancy's head spins his way. "We're not trying to...does it seem that way to you?"

"Yeah," Jonathan answers. He sees her confused expression and regrets his words immediately. "Just forget it, it's not important. Have a good night," he adds, exiting the car.

Nancy smiles and wishes him good night but when she pulls up at her house, fifteen minutes later, she's still pondering his words.

To Be Continued...

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

Well the language definitely picks up in this chapter, hence the rating change.

Nancy's outside the Byers' house at 8:15 the next morning, with Mike in the backseat. She'd given her mom a simple answer as to why she had Jonathan's car; his house was right near Steve's so she didn't want to make him drive her all the way home and then have to drive back. They'd agreed on that story last night. Karen hadn't seemed to buy it but she'd held back from further inquiry, bolstered by her new commitment to improving her relationship with her children.

Steve's reclining against the school building when they arrive, trying to look cool being alone, but failing miserably. He still hasn't really gotten over his epic fall from social grace but is learning to accept it.

"You guys ready for this test?" Nancy questions as they make their way through the winding school corridors.

"Ha! I'd be lucky to scrape a pass!" Steve scoffs, unlocking Nancy's locker for her.

"Yeah, I doubt I'll pass," Jonathan echoes, looking around uneasily. "I'm gonna go, guys..." he mutters walking off, hunching his shoulders instinctively.

"What is it with him?" Steve grumbles, his hands on his waist, watching the other boy's retreating figure. "It's like he wishes we didn't hang out with him."

"It's not that, Steve," Nancy says, getting her books out, and then looking at Steve harshly. "He's--"

But just what he was would have to wait. The bell rings shrilly, causing everyone in sight to reach up and covers their ears, almost reflexively.

"Dammit, that sound," Steve huffs, lowering his hands once the

clanging had stopped. "I really need to have a word with Vic about it." Vic was the school custodian, who, due to necessity, Steve had built a nice, working relationship with, based mostly upon Steve's seemingly endless supply of cigarettes.

"Okay, I cannot be late for History again. Lombard is already looking for a reason to fail me," Steve continues. He leans over and kisses Nancy on the cheek, which makes her think about Jonathan's comment from the previous night, as she makes her way to English. There are three eleventh grade classes at Hawkins High and the three just happen to spend most of their time in different classrooms. Nancy and Steve share Literature and Art, Steve and Jonathan have Government together, and Nancy and Jonathan are both in Pre-Calc. But that's it. Even lunch is tough because on Mondays, Nancy has first-period lunch while the boys have theirs second, and this is the case for Jonathan too, on Wednesdays, so the amount of time the three hang out in school is kept to a minimum.

It's a Tuesday though, so at a quarter to one, Nancy corners Jonathan at his locker. She and Steve have worked out his schedule and make sure to be at his locker before he makes his escape because once he gets to his car, there's little to no chance of getting him back inside.

"Hey," she smiles sweetly, keeping a firm grip on his arm. "Come on."

He allows himself to be led into the dreaded cafeteria and sits down at the table where Steve is already reclining.

"Did you really have to choose such a prominent spot?" Jonathan questions the elder boy, hunkering down, in an apparent attempt at making himself invisible.

"I like to be the center of attention," Steve counters, removing his Nike-covered feet from the table and scooting over to allow Nancy some room. It's an unspoken agreement between the three of them, either Steve and Nancy or Jonathan and Nancy on one side and the remaining boy on the other. Never both boys on the same side. "What's that saying 'even bad publicity is good', or something ..."

"There's no such thing as bad publicity," Nancy supplies, taking out

her vegetable wrap.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” Steve pulls out his own lunch, a badly wrapped bagel, stuffed with haphazardly applied bacon and melted cheese.

“Except that’s BS,” Jonathan murmurs, looking around uncomfortably. He hasn’t brought lunch as usual and they’ve long since learned not to ask him about it.

“Not in my book Byers, not in my book,” Steve grins before taking a big bite out of his sandwich.

“Uh, what do you need publicity for, exactly? Do you have big plans?” Nancy asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Ah, ya’ know...stuff. The more people you know, the better. That’s my motto. How do you think I have an endless supply of beer?” He asks triumphantly.

“You’re such an idiot, Steve,” Nancy shakes her head, trying to hide her grin. “We all know very well that all you have to do to get that stuff is ask your cousin for some. There’s no risk involved. No high-stakes maneuvering, no mysterious ‘contact’...you can stop pretending you’re this big, tough ‘bad boy’, okay? We both know you’re just a softie under all your bravado.”

Steve blushes, looking properly embarrassed at being exposed like that, but really he doesn’t mind much. It’s good to know that he doesn’t have to pretend, at least in front of a couple of people. He chances a glance at Byers who’s looking at him with an insolent smirk, as if in agreement with Nancy.

“Speaking of bad publicity,” Jonathan pipes up a moment later, looking darkly at something over Steve’s shoulder. His tone is warning and Steve immediately knows what’s up.

“Well, well, well, if it ain’t Moe, Larry, and Curly...” Everyone in the vicinity bursts out laughing because, of course, that was just terribly witty.

Nancy takes a deep breath and puts her hand on Steve’s arm. “Just

ignore him, Steve. Please!” She whispers, beseechingly. Steve plays with a fork on the table, happening to glance up and meet Jonathan’s eye. The two stare at each other as the abuse starts to be thrown their way.

“The Slut, the Pussy, and...drumroll...the Peeeerve! What a group you three make! The troubled trio!” Steve could feel Tommy’s hot breath on his neck and it stank. But he could also feel Nancy’s hand, gripping him reassuringly. Jonathan is still staring at him, an unreadable expression on his face, but this too, makes Steve feel a little better.

“You know Tommy,” Carol’s voice joins the mix. She’s wearing another ridiculously high-waisted pair of jeans that leave little to the imagination. “I think this one,” she nudges Jonathan with her hip. “Is rubbing off on the others...”

Tommy sniggers and the crowd that’s listening in joins him, sycophantically. “I actually think it’s all about Daddy issues,” Tommy says, hands settling on the edge of their table as he bends over slightly and looks at each of them in turn. Steve’s face is reddening and his fists are clenched under the table. Jonathan is still unreadable, though if you look closely, you could see his breathing picking up. Nancy is glancing back and forth, between the boys, visibly worried about them, but ostensibly completely unbothered herself.

“I mean, think of it...this one’s father is like a log, the mom obviously wants to leave him but is sticking it out for the kids...that whole load of shit,” The assembled crowd guffaws and Tommy grins, pleased that he’s getting such a response from the onlookers. “Stevie-boy’s daddy, we all know, is disappointed in his fucked up, idiot of a son and is also cheating on his mommy any chance he’s got. And then there’s Byers...guy’s dad is in a class of his own, though who can blame him walking off, with a fag like this for a son...”

Steve’s had enough. He jumps up, jerking his arm free from Nancy’s grasp, and shoves Tommy, sending him stumbling a few feet back. The crowd ooohes at the sudden move, eager for more and it’s this, more than anything, the fact that the whole cafeteria considers this nothing more than lunchtime entertainment, that infuriates Jonathan,

who leaps up and grabs Steve's arms from behind.

"Stop it, it's not worth it. *He's* not worth it," Jonathan mutters to Steve while glancing back at Nancy for help. "He's just a piece of trash...don't bother..."

Tommy regains his balance, walks back over unfazed, and gets right in Steve's face. "Come on, Stevie-boy, let's finish this, huh? Just you and me."

Nancy joins Jonathan in containing Steve and whispers something into the older boy's ear that makes him stop struggling. Tommy stares him down for a minute or two before spitting on his shirt in disgust. "Nothing's changed, still the same fucking wuss, grow a pair of balls, will you, or maybe Byers is turning you into a fag, too?"

Steve's large, black eyes are flaming but, remarkably, he restrains himself, and soon enough Tommy walks off, followed by his pack of hyenas. Nancy keeps a firm hold on Steve's arm, while Jonathan lets go and walks off. She leads Steve out of the cafeteria, down the long hallway, out the back door, and into the parking lot.

"Just calm down, okay, you can't go back into class like this," Nancy mutters to him, sliding down against the building.

"I'm calm," Steve nearly growls, sliding down beside her, his clenched hands shaking with suppressed anger. "I just wish you'd let me kick his fucking ass back there."

"Steve, not to insult you or anything, but you wouldn't have kicked his ass, you'd have ended up with a nasty black eye or worse," Nancy says gently.

"Great, I'm a fucking weakling, okay?! Is that what you want?!" He's yelling now but he really doesn't care if anyone hears; his blood is still boiling, his pulse throbbing in his ears, and his mind going over everything Tommy had put out there...*cheating on his mommy every chance he's got...grow a pair of balls...mom wants to leave...disappointed with his idiot of a son...who can blame him walking off with a fag...*

Surprisingly, it was that last bit that pissed him off the most because

he'd seen Jonathan's face change when Tommy had uttered those words. He'd seen the mask slip for a split-second, that fluttering of the eyelashes, that conveyed so much more than could ever be spoken. The pain, so raw and so old, that it would take a lifetime to get over. That was why he'd gotten up and engaged to begin with. He hated anyone who could do that to Jonathan and he hated himself right then because he knew that he'd done the same just a few short months ago...

Nancy's whispered words come back to him. *Don't do this for Jonathan, he doesn't want you to...*

"How did you know that was why I-" Steve begins.

"Because you got up right then when he was saying his disgusting piece about Jonathan. And yeah, I saw it too, that look in his eyes that he doesn't want anyone to see, okay? I just know that he hates us taking shit for hanging out with him and he'd probably refuse to anymore if you'd gotten into a fight."

"What pisses me off is why he won't stand up for himself? Why does he take Tommy's shit?" Steve mutters, chucking a rock at the closest car, a Dodge Monaco.

"It's not like he never does, he stood up to you..." Nancy says, pinching her forehead, trying to stave off a headache.

"Ah, great! So me he can fuck up, but Tommy he can't? What the fuck is his game anyway? Why's he so damn...weird?!" Steve doesn't know why he's furious all of a sudden, but he is, and he's not gonna hide it.

"Steve, you're not being fair! He attacked you because that was the worst week of his life and you went and talked shit about his brother who he half-thought was dead, okay?!! You were being a complete assh-"

"I know! I know! You think I don't know that?! I fucking think about that every day, okay?! I'm evil, I'm a fucking lowlife! I know that!!" Steve's voice is wavering by the time he finishes his outburst and Nancy grabs him around the waist.

"Stop it, Steve! Shut up. You're not evil, you're not a bad guy, okay? You don't need to be so dramatic. You made a mistake, we all do. It's okay," Nancy says it all while staring him in the eye and suddenly it's too much for Steve. He slams his lips together, pretending to bite them, but can't stop his eyes from tearing up. Nancy doesn't miss it and tightens her hold around him. "He forgives you completely, you know?"

"How can you know that?" Steve asks despite himself, tossing another rock, this time a little harder. He jumps when a couple of sophomores sneak out of the building and past them, but the skivers don't give them a second glance and he relaxes.

"He hangs out with you, doesn't he? He wouldn't if he didn't fully forgive you," Nancy says, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "Anyway, I've been meaning to talk to you about him."

Steve's suddenly tenses up, his mind working feverishly. *Does she know, somehow? Am I that obvious? I was pretty obvious yesterday... Does she suspect that I...*

"He's not like most people, okay? He's not like any friend you've ever had before," Nancy's saying. Steve breathes again. *Friend...we're just friends...* "You can't mess with him like you do with everyone else."

"What do you mean 'mess with'?" Steve asks, getting defensive.

"Tease...harass...even if you don't mean anything by it," Nancy adds quickly, seeing Steve's reaction.

"What do you mean? Give me an example," Steve says, his face falling, now counting the black spots on the concrete where countless rowdy teenagers have been spitting their gum for years and years.

"Okay, so you know the first time he came over to your place...that was like at least a month ago? So the first thing you do is say 'had no trouble finding the place, did you?'," Nancy looks at him for confirmation and he nods. "Okay, so that was like the last thing you should have said because you were obviously referencing that night that he spied on us. Do you know how much he regrets that?"

"Yeah," Steve says, a small smile spreading over his face. "He only apologized to me five times...a day...for a month."

Nancy smiles, but it quickly slides off and is replaced with something that resembles frustration. "Okay, but if you know how much that bothers him, then why did you say something like that? He just doesn't appreciate it. Call it whatever you want, yeah, he's sensitive, alright?"

Steve's beginning to understand but is still a bit perplexed. "But, I mean, why?"

"Why?!" Nancy exclaims disbelievingly. "Because he doesn't trust anyone. Because he's spent his whole life being bullied and knocked down. I'm pretty sure his dad abused him, whether it was physical, verbal, or both, and then he came to school where he was called everything in the book. That doesn't lend itself to being able to withstand a ribbing very well, okay? He goes into automatic defense mode when you say things like that, feels like he's being attacked. Just...just go easy on him, you're good for him and it would be a shame for that to blow up just because of some silly comment."

Steve is quiet when she finishes speaking, mulling over her words and trying to ignore the ache they caused in his chest. Finally, after a good three minutes, he speaks up. "Jesus, Nancy...are you going for psychology or something?"

"No," Nancy smiles. "Just common sense."

"So tell me why he doesn't want me to knock out Tommy for him?" Steve, presses, eager to get a better understanding of the inner workings of Byers' mind. "If he hates being teased then why wouldn't he want--"

"Because what he likes even less than being teased is having people he cares about getting attacked because of him," Nancy answers quickly, her jaw tensing. "He blames it on himself and then goes and tries to cut you off because he doesn't want you taking shit on his behalf."

"That's screwed up," Steve says, though his mind is going wild. *Did*

she just say 'people he cares about'? Does he actually care...?

"Yeah, tell me about it," Nancy says bitterly. "Just watch, he's gonna go and avoid us for the next few days. He's gonna shut himself in his room and wallow in self-pity until I bang on his door and tell him to get his head on straight and stop being an idiot."

Steve laughs while getting up. "Yeah, but what if we don't let him? Go knock some sense into him right now. Let him know that Tommy will be a douche no matter what and--"

"You know that's not entirely true, though?" Nancy asks, following his lead and getting up. "He's somewhat right; we do only take shit because we hang out with him. We wouldn't get bothered half as much if it was just us two."

"Yeah, but who gives a fuck?!!" Steve responds angrily, misinterpreting her statement. "You're honestly gonna listen to what--"

"No! I don't care, but he is right," Nancy interrupts, rolling her eyes. "Where are we heading?"

Steve's leading the way across the parking lot. "I don't know, where's his car? He's probably sulking in there listening to some depressing shit about gloom and death..."

Nancy chuckles because it's a very accurate picture. "Oh my God! I just remembered. I've got chemistry right now! I'm probably late already...Shit!"

"Hey, it's..." Steve consults his watch, a Rolex he got from his grandfather for his sixteenth birthday. "It's half past, you're just ten minutes late, hurry."

"Okay. Hey, go talk to him yourself. He'd probably get all annoyed anyway if it's both of us," Nancy says quickly. "And Steve..." He turns back to her one last time and she grabs his hand, squeezing it. "What Tommy said about you...don't think for a second...we'll talk about it."

Steve grimaces and bids her good luck. He's been trying his hardest

not to think about what Tommy said because it was so on point. Those words had stung but he'd been too focused on Jonathan to really think about himself, not to mention Nancy who acted like she didn't give a damn, but must really be ready to cry. *Shit! Where are the good old days when my biggest worry was how to get laid and if my hair looked alright? When did life become so complicated?*

When Jonathan Byers entered your life, is when, that nagging voice in his head reminds him. And yet, I won't have it any other way, so what does that mean?

It means you care about him, dummy! Stop trying to hide, because everyone knows now! You almost got into a fight over him for God's sake!

Steve finally spots Jonathan's car and pauses, taking a minute to watch the other boy in a moment when he believes he's unobserved. His head is bent and he's biting his nails, his shaggy long hair, screening his eyes. Feeling like an intruder, Steve closes the last few yards to the car and taps on the passenger side window. Jonathan looks up and, amazingly, doesn't roll his eyes or sigh, but leans right over and opens the door.

"So, can I come in?" Steve asks, putting on a fake cheery tone.

"Yeah," Jonathan clears the passenger seat of a sweater that looks like Nancy's, a couple of tapes, a lighter (Steve does a double take at that one), and a half-empty coca-cola bottle. He settles down and then turns to Jonathan, after a moment of listening to the other boy's song choice.

"The Who, right?"

Jonathan raises his right eyebrow a fraction, looking mildly impressed. "How'd you know?"

"Come on, man! I can recognize Baba O'Riley anywhere," Steve grins, pulling out a cigarette.

"Ha, I bet if it was on something like *Bargain* or *Going Mobile*, you'd be lost," Jonathan retorts, reaching into the backseat to retrieve the lighter he'd just tossed. He ignites it and holds it out, a few inches

from Steve's mouth.

"You definitely lost me there," Steve leans forward, cigarette secure between his substantial lips, feeling an odd thrill at the fact that Jonathan is lighting his smoke. "I thought you were allergic to anything close to mainstream?"

"The Who is okay," Jonathan answers simply, pocketing the lighter this time.

After taking a drag, Steve digs back into his pocket and pulls out another cigarette. "You want one?"

Jonathan waves him off sluggishly. "No, it's okay. Thanks."

"Do you smoke?" Steve probes, curious, never figuring Jonathan the type.

"No. Though I've gotten high a couple of times. That's my mom's," he explains, patting the pocket where he'd just stashed the lighter.

Steve nods his understanding and readjusts, half-turning in his seat to face Jonathan who's staring languidly out the windshield. The seats are squashy and comfortable, and this, combined with the nicotine now flowing through his system, serves to relax him. When a light drizzle starts to fall moments later, it becomes positively cozy inside the car, and the two sit in silence for a while, Steve working on his cigarette, and Jonathan letting his mind wander. The first sound that's made, is Steve opening the door for a moment to toss his stub but Jonathan stops him, pointing to a cup on the dashboard, that on closer inspection, is home to a nice collection of cigarette butts.

"Nancy'd have a fit if she saw you tossing that," Jonathan says after a while, leaning forward to switch the tape to the B-side. Roger Daltrey's powerful bari-tenor begins emanating from the speakers once again and they both listen for a bit.

But I'm in tune

Right in tune

I'm in tune

And I'm gonna tune

*Right in on you
Right in on you
Right in on you...*

*I get a little tired of having to say
"Do you come here often?"
But when I look in your eyes and see the harmonies
And the heartaches soften...*

"So..." Steve finally says, deciding to take the dive.

"So," Jonathan echoes. "Am I about to find out why we're sitting here in companionable silence?"

Steve lets out a laugh, shaking his head. "You're impossible, Byers."

"Like you're any better," Jonathan says dryly, though his mouth is twitching. It occurs to Steve then, for the first time, just how odd of a pair they are. Everything about them just screams clash, from his poufed hair to Jonathan's droopy mop, from his athletic build to Jonathan's awkward one, from his skimpy polos to Jonathan's bulky sweaters, from his wide grin to Jonathan's sly smirk, from his designer jeans to Jonathan's generic ones, from his Nikes to Jonathan's knock-offs...The differences between them are endless, really. *Besides for what Tommy kindly let us know...*

"So about the cafeteria scene..." Steve begins.

"Ha. 'Scene'...Nice way to sugarcoat it, but yeah, what about it?"

"Well...why'd you walk off?"

"Why'd I walk off?" Jonathan ponders, his eyes narrowing, looking at Steve in an are-you-serious way. "I didn't exactly feel like sticking around."

Steve's feeling bold and decides to dispense with the bull. "Nancy seems to think that you'll blame yourself for everything and go and sulk in your room and wallow in self-pity for a few days. Her words, not mine!" Steve adds, seeing Jonathan's face at the end.

Jonathan's jaw sets defiantly and he blinks a few times, staring out

the drivers-side window. Steve finds it kind of...cute, and he waits for Jonathan's response while admiring his jawline and cheekbones. *I wonder how it would feel like to run a finger over those while clamping over his delicate-looking lips...*

"Well, what do you want me to say?" Jonathan suddenly shoots out, whipping his head around to face Steve. "You were honest with me, I'll be brutally honest with you, okay? I hate it that you guys have to take Tommy's shit because of me. I don't know what your game is, but I hate that you think you need to hang out with me, because of what happened that crazy night, like I'm your charity case or something. I hate every second I spend in this crappy building, in this parking lot, in this goddamn town, okay? I hate going to the supermarket and having to hear all the rumors that go around about my mom and my family. I hate it all, okay?"

Steve is a little shocked at Jonathan's outburst, trying to process all that he said, but his mind is stuck on the bit about him. "You think I hang out with you because you're my pity case?! Maybe it's escaped your radar, but I'm not a very charitable person, Byers. And if you think I'd spend hours a day and quite a few cases of beer on a charity case, then you're really overestimating the person I am."

Jonathan looks at him, his mouth hanging open slightly, an incredulous look on his face.

"And honestly," Steve continues. "For someone who's supposed to be observant and all that crap, you're pretty stupid if you still think that's the reason I hang out with you."

"Yeah?" Jonathan jumps in. "Then why do you? You dodged my question last night, maybe you can give me the truth now?"

Ah! Goddammit! "The truth, Byers? Fine, here's the truth!" Steve's voice is getting louder and louder, but not in an angry way. "I've been miserable most my life, okay? The Great Steve Harrington! King Steve! Ha! I could barely get myself out of bed most mornings! Then you went and knocked some goddamn sense into my inflated head and I realized what an idiot and what a fucking waste of time Tommy and his gang are. You guys are good for me, okay?! You actually give a damn about things and, for a change, I don't feel like a piece of shit

when I hang out with you!!

Jonathan goes quiet and turns away for a moment, before reaching out a hand to Steve's shoulder. "Sorry," he mutters barely audibly. "I just have a hard time trusting people."

It takes all Steve has not to close the gap between them right then and there. This marks the first time that Jonathan's initiated any physical contact between them and it's making his heart pound in an unnatural, or perhaps extremely natural, way. *He doesn't mean anything by it, this is normal, just a friendly gesture! He's touching your shoulder, for God's sake, Steve! Calm the fuck down!*

Steve nearly breathes a sigh of relief when Jonathan removes his hand from his shoulder. The gesture probably lasted no more than five seconds, but it was long enough to make the scene in the battered car a little too intimate for Steve's comfort.

"So..." Steve laughs, noticing his abnormally high pitch. "Now that I've bared my soul to you, maybe you can stop acting like an idiot."

"I can try," Jonathan grins. "But that's my natural state."

"I like you in your natural state too."

It slips out of Steve's mouth before he can stop it and he gasps mentally, watching Jonathan's reaction. The younger boy doesn't seem to get the double meaning there, unless he's a grandmaster at disguising his emotions, and Steve nearly cries in relief. *Thank God his mind is not half as dirty as mine!* And then this pops into Steve's head: *Hopefully I can be the one to fuck it up...*

"Well, anyway, what's on this test?" Jonathan asks, interrupting his blasphemous thoughts. "I'm taking it in ten minutes."

Steve pretends to look around, craning his neck as far as he can. "Gotta make sure Nancy is not within ten kilometers," he explains, seeing Jonathan's puzzlement at his exaggerated display. This earns him a laugh and he tries to remember anything he can of the test. "Well, let's see. There's this part where you gotta recreate the reactions..." He can't remember much because of everything that's

happened since, but he gives Jonathan what he can.

They head back into school a few minutes later, wholly unconcerned about having missed sixth period, and having mostly recovered from the lunch incident. Steve's mind, though, is far from peaceful. *If you don't learn to control that fat mouth of yours, then things are gonna get ugly...*

To Be Continued...

Notes for the Chapter:

Well, as you can see, I'm going in the Stonathan direction, though Nancy will be there to prod her boys along. I don't know if I'm drifting. It's fun to write these three but difficult at the same time. Let me know if I've got this right. Also not quite sure about the pacing and often find myself reverting back to past tense writing lol.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Here it is...the third installment. I felt like I was faltering a bit at the beginning of this chapter, but I did crack myself up writing this first bit with Steve at the library...lol. I'm thinking this'll be a six chapter story, with five being the big chapter...I did some studying of the Byers house for this chapter and am now an expert in it. Weird little fact: Jonathan's room is right next to Joyce's, and Will's is across the hall...just find it interesting...

Steve circles the Library a few times, checking out the scene. It's 5:38, according to his dashboard, on a Thursday, twenty-two minutes till closing time and he believes this to be an opportune moment to sneak into the library without anyone noticing. After his fifth drive-by, Steve decides it's safe and quickly parks his car, blocking an alley. *It'll just take a moment*, he tells himself.

He slips into the library, his eyes darting around, scoping out the place, ready to bolt if there's anyone he knows. The librarian, Marissa, looks up and eyes him suspiciously before returning to whatever she's doing. Steve breathes a sigh of relief and carefully sneaks off, looking for the Self-Help section. He's wearing the quietest pair of sneakers he owns, tested in his room last night, and what he fancies are inconspicuous clothes. Steve finds himself hunching as he makes his way past numerous towering bookcases, eager to get out. *I'm turning into Jonathan...*

"Aha," he mutters, finding the section at last. It's been many years since he's stepped foot in the library and in those days, he certainly wasn't in this particular aisle and probably never dreamed he would be. "Hmmm..." He peruses the selection, still glancing around furtively, though the library appears to be mostly empty.

How To Tame Your Sweet Tooth...The American Toxicity Diet...Trim Your Waist in 30 Days...*Okay, clearly I'm in the diet section. That's one thing I don't need help on, at least...*

He moves on, skimming each shelf. Get Off the Couch, Lazy Bitch... *Hmmm, there's an interesting one...* Self-Deprecation and its Consequences...*whatever....* The Dysfunctional Family...*that one looks more my speed...* Get In, Get Rich, Get Out...*ha, right...* Shut Your Trap... Steve stops at this one and pulls it off the shelf: Shut Your Trap: How to Control Your Big Mouth and More, a Guide to Self-Control. *Perfect*, he thinks, *the library ain't half bad*.

Steve is about to leave when something else catches his eye. It's at his eye level, a large black book with gray block lettering; A Complete Guide to Human Sexual Behavior. *Steve, get your ass outta here now! It's bad enough that you've got a book on self-control...*

But then he spots an even better one: Homosexuals: What's Fact and What's Fiction. Steve is about to head over when the dreaded happens.

"Steven, what are you doing here?"

He spins around and breathes a sigh of relief, while carefully inching away from the sexual stuff. "Hi, Mrs. Roebing," he calls out easily, turning on the charm. It's his English teacher, a pleasant, older woman who he doesn't have much to do with. "How are you?"

"I'm doing fine, son. Just surprised to see you here, I never thought of you as the library type," She says, not unkindly.

Steve chuckles as he makes his way over and leans casually on the end of the bookshelf. "Well, you know..." he shrugs and waves his hand in a gesture that he himself doesn't know the meaning of.

Mrs. Roebing smiles and looks down at her watch. "Well, you better hurry, they close in five minutes."

"Yes Ma'am," Steve says, giving her a salute. Then he heads over to the desk, dreading this next bit. It had taken him half an hour to locate his library card which he'd finally found buried in a box of his old stuff in the basement. He had no idea if it was still valid, but... here he was.

"You're cutting it close," Marissa says as he approaches the desk.

He grimaces uneasily and slaps the incriminating book down with his library card on top.

“Whoohoo...self-control, huh?” she says, impressed, looking down her glasses at his selection. “Well, that’s nice to see.” Marissa takes a little longer examining his library card before apparently being satisfied and opening up the book. She writes his name in, stamps a due date, and then hands it back with a calculating look. There’s something extremely unsettling about her gaze that makes Steve just want to bolt, but he controls himself- *Ha! Working already...* - and bids her goodnight, before leaving the library at what he hopes is a casual pace.

Once outside, he breaks into a run and is back to the safety of his car less than a minute later.

Phew! What a harrowing experience! Steve thinks as he starts the car and races home.

Steve fails the Chemistry test, Jonathan passes, just barely, and Nancy gets a 94 but is still not happy.

“I cannot believe that I got number 15 wrong!” Nancy exclaims over her sandwich.

“Why, what question was that?” Steve asks lazily, whipping out his own test. It’s a week after the cafeteria fight and they’re hanging out in a cozy spot that they’ve discovered. It’s a three-minute drive from school, at the side of the road, an alcove just beyond a thin line of trees, where they’ve been spending lunch for a couple of days now. After the Tommy incident, Steve and Nancy have come around to Jonathan’s way of thinking and agree that getting the hell out of school is the way to go.

It’s a brisk, sunny day and a little chilly, but warmer than usual for mid-February; Nancy’s wearing her red monster-hunting jacket,

Jonathan's wearing his usual assortment of darkly colored tees, sweaters, and shirts, all at once, and Steve's wearing his green varsity jacket which the other two have become quite familiar with. They're sitting in a triangle, each leaning against their own tree and shivering slightly against the cold. Things have changed between them, thanks to Tommy, though perhaps they aren't ready to acknowledge it. They've grown closer, less self-conscious around each other, more open. Even small stuff, like a pat on the back, a shared smile, a hurried 'thanks', have taken on a new meaning.

"That's the one on Boyle's Law, I just can't believe myself!" Nancy is saying.

"Ha! Even I got that one right," Steve chuckles, feeling somewhat proud, though he doesn't know why. He got twenty-two wrong to her three.

Nancy makes a face at him and he laughs.

"The Great Nancy Wheeler's GPA has just gone down from 3.999 to 3.998," Steve jokes, putting on a deep commentator's voice.

Nancy gives him a twisted smile and pokes him in the ribs. "You're hilarious, Steve," she mutters, shaking her head.

Steve grins idiotically and gives a modest bow. "What can I say? I try..."

"What do you think, Jonathan? Should he try out for the..." Nancy trails off, noticing that Jonathan's head is bowed lower than usual.

"Is he asleep?"

Steve leans down, trying to see Jonathan's face. "I don't know...I think so. Why's he so tired all the time? Remember that day he said he was going on four hours of sleep?"

"Yeah, been wondering about it, but I didn't want to pry," Nancy says thoughtfully. They both stare at his hunched back, which is rising and falling steadily. "Wake him up," Nancy commands.

Steve reaches over and grasps Jonathan's shoulder, shaking him

gently. He wakes up with a start and looks around blearily. "Oh, sorry. Dozed off..." he mutters, stifling a yawn and rubbing his eyes.

"Yeah, we were wondering what's up with that..." Steve ventures. "Why are you so tired all the time?"

Jonathan doesn't even think about it, he just tells them the truth. "It's Will. He's always up at like 3 a.m....nightmares and everything..."

"So...?" Steve eyes narrow in confusion.

"What do you mean?" Jonathan shoots back, equally baffled.

"What does that have to do with..." Steve trails off seeing the incredulous look that Nancy's giving him. "Oh. You're up with him. Of course you are." *I should've known that it was something like this. Guy doesn't do a thing for himself...*

"Do you have a selfish bone in your body, Byers?" Steve asks. It's a comment that a week ago just wouldn't fly but now simply earns him one of those deliciously sweet smiles that he's quickly growing addicted to.

"But seriously man, is there anything we can do to help?" Steve adds earnestly, trying to curb the pesky butterflies that have become semi-permanent fixtures in his stomach. The book hasn't really solved any of his problems. *Yeah, but it might help if you actually opened it up and read it instead of just staring at the cover...Ahh...just shut up whoever you are...I'm your conscience...I told you to shut up!*

Jonathan looks at him for a second, making sure that he's not playing around, before answering. It's a sign of how far they've come that he doesn't brush them off but instead shrugs. "I don't know. It's not like I can help him myself, so...I don't know." Steve doesn't fail to notice how his sleep-relaxed face tightens. It's very strange for him to be noticing these things, too, since he was never very good at picking up body-language cues, but with Jonathan...

"Yeah but you can't keep living this way," Nancy interjects.

"Nah, it's okay," Jonathan says quickly. "I get about four hours a night and then take a one or two-hour nap, so it adds up."

"Come on! That's still only what? Five, six hours at the most?" Steve responds loudly. "I'm like a baby, I need a good ten hours."

"It's okay, guys. It really is. After almost..." Jonathan trails off, rubbing his knee in an attempt at absentmindedness.

"What?" Nancy presses.

"Nothing," Jonathan says quickly. But after earning a look from her, he continues. "Just after almost losing him, I really don't care if I have to stay up for the rest of my life looking after him..."

Nancy smiles fondly at Jonathan in response, but Steve is once again struck by that painful feeling, the one that went a bit like this: *I wish someone (specifically Jonathan) cared about me as much as he cares about his brother...* He's never had siblings, never really wished he had either, until now that is, even though he knows that Jonathan's brand of love is probably not universal. *Yeah, just look at Nancy and her brother...*

Nancy stands up, brushing off her skirt, and the boys follow. "We gotta get back, it's..." She checks her watch. "...it's fifteen after."

Steve groans. He's got art next, which is not one of his strong suits. "Oh man...Hey, Byers, you wanna cut?"

Jonathan's eyes widen and he looks scared for a second, before quickly regaining himself. "Oh...cut...Yeah, actually. I've got math next and Niece hates me."

"Well, that's decided then," Steve grins and settles himself back down, looking utterly content with life.

Jonathan hands the keys over to Nancy and she pockets them looking at the two boys a little doubtfully. "You know...college applications are--"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah...we know," Steve calls out noisily from where he's sitting. "That's why you need to get back to school and keep your grades up while we goof off here."

Nancy huffs and rolls her eyes. "Well, I'll see you guys tomorrow

then, my mom's picking me up for our 'family day' thing," She says holding her arms out towards Jonathan. He leans forward and gives her a short, one-armed hug, while Steve bursts out laughing.

"How are they going, those family outings?" Karen had started taking the whole Wheeler family on weekly trips to promote "family bonding", and Nancy's been regaling them with the horror stories that they tended to end up being.

"Don't even ask..." Nancy mutters, leaning down to Steve for a hug too. He reaches up, lazily patting her back.

"Poor you. Good luck!"

"Uh huh, thanks," Nancy says, straightening back up. She leaves the little clearing, glancing back every few seconds at the boys. They hear the car start and pull away a moment later and then it's just the two of them. Jonathan sinks down beside Steve and yawns. They sit in comfortable silence for a couple of minutes before Steve speaks.

"You have plans for college?"

Jonathan shrugs. "I don't know anymore. It's more than a year away so I try not to think about it. I...If I can, I'd like to go to NYU, but I'd need a scholarship to go there, and..." he shrugs again.

Steve sits himself up a little straighter, reaches out a hand and pats Jonathan on the back. When the younger boy doesn't flinch, Steve feels like he won something. "Hey, you're pretty smart. You should go for it. I'll stop trying to make you goof off."

Jonathan smiles, a little sadly, it seems to Steve, and looks down, playing with his hands. "It's okay...I...This is okay," he says cryptically, leaving Steve to decipher the meaning. *Arggh! What is he saying? I need Nancy here to help me figure out the puzzle that this guy is...* Steve realizes that it's been a while since his last wisecrack, that he's actually engaged in a personal conversation with Jonathan, and he doesn't know how to feel. It's thrilling in a way, and new, to have the other boy talk to him in such an open way, and the fact that he's starting to confide in him, makes Steve feel a sense of accomplishment, but it's terrifying too because an honest Jonathan is

pretty intense. *That's a good quality to have in the be...SHUT UP!*

Steve's never done well with feelings, and besides for a couple of turbulent discussions with Nancy-and that outburst last week in Jonathan's car- he's never divulged any of his own.

Well, when all else fails, go back to what you know, right? "You'd have a hard time getting away from me anyway, Byers. I'm as clingy as they come." It's said in a light-hearted manner, but there's a bit of honest truth in the statement that Jonathan picks up on. He can tell, though, that Steve is uncomfortable so he doesn't comment and instead, gets up.

"We should go. We don't have the car and it's like a fifteen-minute walk," He says, offering a hand to Steve, who's still slumped against a tree. Steve accepts it a bit gingerly, and Jonathan hauls him up. *He's got a good grip*, Steve thinks, a little distracted by the fact that he and Jonathan are, in effect, holding hands.

The moment passes and they make their way through the trees and back onto the road. It's a pleasant, scenic walk and Steve finds himself humming, something he always does when relaxed.

Jonathan stops walking suddenly. "Is that footloose?" He asks, with barely contained disgust.

"Sure is!" Steve grins, starting to shake around a bit as he continues walking. "Jack...get back...come on before we crack..." he sings. "Lose...your blues....everybody cut footloose..." For the instrumental part that follows, Steve gets out his air guitar and starts strumming it like a pro. He would never admit it, but he played the air guitar quite often, alone in his room.

"You're playing, so cool...obeyin' every rule," Steve continues, moving into Jonathan's path and singing into the younger boy's face, which is a deep shade of red. "Dig a way down in your heart...you're burnin', yearnin' for songs..."

Jonathan's had enough and puts a hand out, forcing Steve back. "Steve, seriously...you look ridiculous," He mutters, glancing around. Steve quickly falls into his practiced swagger unable to help the huge

grin spreading over his face.

“Don’t like to dance, Byers?”

Jonathan’s blush deepens and he speeds up in a half-hearted attempt to get away from Steve. The older boy runs to catch up and matches his pace easily.

“You know the soundtrack just came out?” He teases. “I’m gonna go buy that one of these days.”

“What a waste of good money,” Jonathan comments dryly.

“Oh yeah? What, should I buy some Echo with the Bunnymen?”

Jonathan actually grimaces. “Echo and the Bunnymen,” he says through gritted teeth. Steve smirks because he got that wrong on purpose.

“I have plans, Jonathan, and those plans involve you...” he says, rubbing his hands together, conspiratorially. “I’m gonna see you dance to footloose before this is over.”

Jonathan actually lets out a chuckle. “No, you’re not,” he says with conviction.

Steve’s nodding his head vigorously as he answers. “Oh yeah? Watch me. I’m gonna get you drunk one night and it’ll happen.”

“Not a chance,” Jonathan counters shaking his head. “Alcohol just shows the person you really are and what I’m not is someone who would dance to Footloose.”

“Just wait,” Steve says, wagging his finger in the other boy’s face, irritatingly. “And when it does happen, I’m gonna get some footage and make you watch it over and over and over...” Steve stops talking, realizing that Jonathan’s not listening anymore.

The younger boy is crouching down a few feet ahead, facing the trees, fully focused on something Steve can’t see. Suddenly, a cat trots out from behind the tree-line. Jonathan holds his hand out towards it, beckoning it closer, and slowly but surely, it comes. It’s a gray and

white tabby, but it's razor-thin and looks sick. Jonathan begins petting it cautiously and it leans into his touch, while Steve stays back not wanting to scare it off; it seems like he's always doing that, whether it's people or animals.

"Careful man, you don't want it to bite. These things could have rabies," Steve says watching as Jonathan continues petting it. He can't help but notice how nimble the younger boy's fingers are and familiar thoughts begin to run through his head. *Hmmm...imagine how nice it would feel if he's running his hands all over you like that, Steve?*

"I don't think it's a wild cat...it's been following us for a while...it's starving," Jonathan mutters, picking the thing up.

They continue their walk, Steve feeling a bit like a third wheel, and arrive back at the school eight minutes later.

"I'm gonna take it home," Jonathan says to Steve as they approach the parking lot.

"Can I come?" Steve asks eagerly, looking for any excuse to get out of school. *Taking care of a sick animal is a good reason...right?*

Jonathan seems to remember Steve for the first time and looks at him. "Oh, yeah. Sorry, got a bit carried away. I just like animals."

"What, and you don't like me?" Steve says quickly. *Dude, you sound so desperate.*

Jonathan just smiles distractedly, craning his neck in search of his car. "Where'd Nancy park...oh! We don't even have the keys..."

"We'll take my car then," Steve's says, leading the way. They pile in and Steve drives off. It's just the second time that the other boy is in his car, the first time being when Jonathan's broke down a couple of weeks back.

"Still not sure where the turnoff to your place is..." Steve mutters after a while, a bit embarrassed. It is strange, but he's only been to Jonathan's house once, to pick Nancy up on a Saturday afternoon. They mostly hang out at the Harrington residence, since Steve's parents are so rarely home, occasionally at the Wheelers, but never

by the Byers. It was a mixture of Steve and Jonathan that made this the case; Jonathan being the self-conscious guy that he was, and Steve wanting to avoid Joyce at all costs. He doesn't think he can face her after what he said about her and he wonders all the time if Jonathan told his family about the fight.

"That's okay, it's in about a mile," Jonathan says, still holding tight to the cat whose face is nuzzled into his chest.

Steve pulls up outside the house and Jonathan takes out a key and unlocks the door. They walk in and hear a woman's voice singing. It's some folksy song that Steve feels like he knows but can't place at the moment.

"Huh?" Jonathan mutters, putting the cat down gently. "Mom? You there?" There was no answer.

Steve tentatively follows the younger boy into the kitchen while looking around. It's changed significantly and for the better. That's not saying much since the last time he was here it was pretty much the House of Horrors, but it isn't just that. *This place is a not just a house, it's a home*, Steve thinks, feeling tacky. But it's true. Everything about the place just screams warmth and comfort, from the beat-up couches to the sun-bleached rug, from the drawings hanging on the refrigerator to the cracks in the walls, from the muddied sneakers, that he nearly trips over, lying messily at the door to the half-full cup of orange juice on the kitchen table, from the scratched wood of the TV mount and bookcases to the numerous pictures that seem to cram every surface, from the...

Yeah, we get it. You like it... the sardonic voice in Steve's head interrupts. And he does like it. It's so utterly...Jonathan, that in that moment he never wants to leave.

They trace the singing down to the kitchen radio which must have been left on and Jonathan switches it off. Then he turns and notices Steve looking around. "I...um...I didn't know anyone was gonna...I would've straightened up a bit...if I knew..." he continues babbling while Steve grows more and more amused. Finally, Jonathan notices the soft smile on the older boy's face and he stops talking, uncomfortable. "What?"

"It's cool, man. I like it. It's a nice change from my place," Steve says, leaning casually against the oven.

"Yeah, it is," Jonathan says opening up a cabinet, before clapping a hand over his mouth. "Sorry."

"Nah, man! I'm telling you, it's fine," Steve waves him off. "I don't have to worry about leaving a fingerprint on the freezer handle or anything like that."

Jonathan laughs but then turns serious, as he takes out a can of tuna and fishes around in a drawer for the can-opener, the cat rubbing against his leg. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, not kidding," Steve answers. "I once spilled milk on our new kitchen chairs and lost my allowance for a month."

"Damn..." is all Jonathan says, but he's looking at Steve strangely as if he wants to say more.

"Yep..." Steve breathes, watching as the other boy dishes some of the tuna into a bowl and sets it down on the floor where the cat starts lapping it up. Jonathan squats down beside it, muttering quietly and petting it gently.

"Hey, Jonathan, where's your camera?"

"Well, technically it's yours since you paid for it, but...yeah, uh, in my room. Second door on the left," he answers, glancing up for a split second to nod in the direction of the room.

Steve slips away and makes his way into Jonathan's room. It's his first time in it, but he feels like he's been there a million times already. The bed is unmade, there are a couple of t-shirts on the floor, the closet door is thrown open and he can see that it's an orderly mess in there...

Just get the camera and stop nosing around, Harrington, before you find something he doesn't want you to see... Steve spots the camera sitting on the easy chair in the corner and scoops it up, intent on leaving when his eye catches sight of a picture. It's of him, and he can't even remember when it's from, but Jonathan seems to have captured a

side of him that he thought he'd hid very well. He's leaning against Jonathan's car and looking down, with a serious, almost mournful, expression on his face; one of the rare moments that he's not smiling in the presence of the other two. For the first time, Steve wonders if his obsession with the other boy is not, in fact, a one-sided affair, as he always believed it to be. *Oh please...just because he's got a picture of you, doesn't mean he's got a thing for you...that's just what he does...* But no matter how much he tries to shut down the thought, the Pandora's Box has been opened and his mind is racing with the possibility.

Steve sighs and leaves the room, already regretting seeing the picture. When he gets back to the kitchen, Jonathan is sitting on the floor, his legs folded, and the cat curled up in his lap. Steve smiles at the sight and quietly turns on the camera, the sound masked by the hum of the refrigerator. The younger boy is still looking down as Steve clicks the shutter, though he looks up a moment later.

"Hey! Did you just..."

"Sure did," Steve grins, patting the camera in mock fondness. "Someone needs to take a picture of you once in a while."

Jonathan huffs and gets up carefully. "Now you sound like my Mom, 'Jonathan, you need to get your face out from behind that camera'..."

"Ha! She's right," Steve says, looking around. "You got a drink around here, I'm kinda thirsty."

Jonathan opens the refrigerator and gestures in its general direction. "Help yourself, cups are over there," he points to the table.

Steve pours himself a cup of orange juice and sits down at the table as Jonathan starts puttering around the kitchen, slapping stuff down on the counters. It's a few minutes before either of them speak.

"What are you doing?" Steve asks puzzled.

"Making dinner," Jonathan answers, his voice muffled, due to his head being buried in a thigh-high cabinet. He emerges moments later, victorious, a pan in hand. Then he sheds a few layers of clothes, leaving him in a thin white t-shirt. It's not tight, unlike his

black one that had Steve's head spinning, but it's a v-neck and a little too loose, the type that slides around when you move a lot. Steve stares for a bit as Jonathan starts peeling vegetables, watching his arms once again.

"So you weren't kidding?" Steve says, snapping out of it and putting his feet up on another chair. "You really do the cooking around here?"

"Yeah," Jonathan shrugs. "It works this way. My mom literally won't let me work more than two nights a week, so I figure this is the least I can do. I don't mind, I kinda like it."

Steve is, for the seven billionth time it seems, impressed by Jonathan's simple, matter-of-fact devotion to his family, and feels a bit ashamed at his own carefree attitude. "So what's for dinner tonight?"

"Um...breaded chicken and I think I'm gonna make a soup because it's still pretty early," he says, flipping through a weathered recipe book.

Steve could feel his mouth watering and gets up. "So, can I help? I feel like such an idiot just watching you work."

Jonathan turns to face the other boy, one eyebrow raised. "Sure. You can start dicing those vegetables," he says, handing Steve the knife he's holding and pointing to a nice pile of carrots, green stuff that Steve can't name, potatoes, and...gulp...an onion. Steve has never cut an onion, but he's heard plenty about their notorious reputation. *Well, we'll soon see how tough they are...*

"That's my worst part," Jonathan supplies helpfully, with an innocent smile. Steve growls at him, washes his hands, and starts cutting up some carrots, which Jonathan's already peeled.

"Okay, we need some music," Steve announces after a minute; he's getting antsy already, not used to doing anything meticulous. Jonathan reaches over and turns on the radio, switching it to the rock station. It's on Van Halen's *Panama*.

“Still better than pop,” Jonathan says quickly, feeling the need to defend himself for tolerating the abomination that was Van Halen; he’d gone on a three-minute rant about *Jump* the other day when Nancy was extolling its virtues.

They work for a while in companionable silence and soon enough they’re singing along to *Let It Be* together, giggling over the other’s off-key singing. Jonathan is on his home turf, his territory, and Steve loves it; he’s like a freer, more easygoing version of himself, laughing and joking around without worrying about anyone seeing.

“Ah, Byers! Do not try out for choir! To think of that poor audience...” Steve chuckles, bent over the counter.

Jonathan jabs him in the side, with the handle of the knife he’s using. “Oh yeah? I’d hate to be within a ten-mile radius of a dancing Steve Harrington.”

“Why?” Steve asks curiously, starting on the infamous onion.

“Don’t wanna get crushed in the stampede to get away,” Jonathan smirks, turning back to the stubborn sweet potato in his hand.

“Okay, okay...” Steve laughs, holding up a hand in surrender. “You’re getting better at this...But then again, you *are* learning from the master.”

“So your claim to fame is the ability to insult people? Impressive!” Jonathan exclaims.

Steve knows he means nothing by it, but it still stings. *Speaking of stinging...* He looks down and finds a thin trail of blood oozing out of a cut on his left thumb. “Oh shit,” he mutters automatically.

Jonathan looks over, the smile slipping off his face. “Oh...Uh, yeah, come here.”

He leads the way to the bathroom and finds the band-aids, opening one up and handing it to Steve, who applies it tightly.

“I’ve got an injury,” he says, turning to Jonathan as they re-enter the kitchen. “I think I should be excused from kitchen duty.”

"You big baby," Jonathan mutters, giving him a light punch to the arm. Steve makes himself comfortable on a couple of chairs and engages Jonathan again as the younger boy continues the job. It's a half hour later when the front door crashes open, making them both jump slightly. Then Will, Lucas, and Dustin burst into the kitchen and stop dead.

"What is he doing here?" Dustin asks Jonathan, completely ignoring the fact that Steve is five feet away. "Didn't you beat him up?" Steve grimaces, suddenly feeling very out of place. Lucas is now looking at him like he's a particularly large cockroach, but at least Will is smiling. *Like brother like brother...*

Jonathan gives one final stir to the soup before turning around. "Um...yeah, but we're okay now."

"Really?" Dustin presses, not knowing when to stop. "So he's not a complete idiot anymore?"

"Well, I can't say that..." Jonathan says, throwing a sly smirk at Steve, who gives him the finger in response.

"Yeah, well, what's for dinner?" Dustin continues, apparently losing interest, and proceeding to move on to his favorite subject. Jonathan gives him the outline and when properly satisfied, the curly-headed boy heads back into the living room and drops his backpack. With one final disgusted look at Steve, Lucas follows his partner in crime, but Will hangs back. He heads over to Jonathan and gives him a quick hug, which Jonathan returns, patting his pint-sized brother's back.

"So how was your day?"

"Okay," Will says, opening up a cabinet and retrieving some chips and cookies. "Mr. Clarke gave us this assignment to explain how the theory of the sun orbiting earth can be true, so we need to work on that. We went to the library first and Dustin got..." He continues chattering, adding a pitcher of lemonade to his pile and then gathers it all up in his thin arms and follows his buddies into the living room.

"Wow! You get the feeling that they don't like me?" Steve jokes when

it's just the two of them. "Jesus! What a pack of hounds..."

Jonathan laughs and heads over to the table, sitting down. "You're lucky Mike isn't here. He's the best roaster of all, you wouldn't last two minutes around him."

"So they eat here all the time? They seem pretty comfortable," Steve continues, playing with a cup on the table.

"Yeah, every Tuesday they're here, because of the Wheeler family outings..." They both share a snigger, imagining Nancy's suffering. "...And they're usually here at least one other night in the week, so..." Jonathan trails off, looking around. "Where's the cat?"

Steve looks around too, baffled. "I don't know...It was sitting on a chair for a bit..."

Suddenly a voice pipes up from the living room. "Jonathan! When did we get a cat?"

They head into the living room and find the cat curled up on a couch next to Dustin's backpack. "I just picked it up today," Jonathan says. "It was starving."

Will rolls his eyes and grins, addressing his friends. "This is the same way we got Chester...he couldn't help dragging him home..." Then he turns back to his brother. "So are we keeping it? Also is it a he or a she?"

"Oh, I haven't checked," Jonathan blushes.

Dustin ends up doing the honors. "Female, guys."

"I don't know if we'll keep it. Kinda up to mom," Jonathan says, turning to leave. The two older boys head back into the kitchen and fool around a bit, before heading into Jonathan's room and doing some more fooling around.

They all sit down to dinner an hour later. It's a boisterous event; the kids are all talking animatedly about Dwarf-planets and meteors, the radio is still playing, and Jonathan and Steve are exchanging their usual barbs. Steve feels a sense of calm and happiness that he hasn't

felt in a while. The whole scene is so cozy and peaceful that he just wants to sit there and memorize every detail, for all those lonely nights that he spends at home.

All too soon, it's over. Lucas and Dustin head home and Will plants himself between the two older boys, hanging on to their every word and making both of them uncomfortable.

"You know Byers, you are a pretty damn good cook," Steve says leaning back in his chair, stuffed.

"High praise, indeed!" Jonathan laughs but is looking very pleased with himself. "You can come again, you know?"

Steve shrugs, not wanting to appear too eager. He's about to leave when the front door opens again.

"Hi, guys. I'm home," a distinctly feminine voice calls.

Oh shit! Well, you can finally get this over with, Steve...

Joyce walks into the kitchen and does a double take at the extra person sitting at the table.

Steve stands up and holds out his hand. "Harrington...uh, Steve Harrington," he grins, hoping that Jonathan is not too far behind him for backup. But instead of shaking his hand, Joyce pulls him into a hug. It's a hug that he's not expecting and one that nearly brings him to tears. It's something his own mother hasn't done for him in a long, long time.

"We've heard a bit about you," She says when she lets go of him at last. "Not much of course, because Jonathan is Jonathan, but enough."

"MoOOOOoom..." Jonathan says warningly, coming over. Steve watches as he kisses Joyce on the cheek and has to actively stop himself from fleeing the room when that's followed up by a tight hug.

Jonathan seems to sense his discomfort and leads him outside a moment later.

“So, I’ll see you tomorrow...” Jonathan says awkwardly. They’ve been chatting for hours but now that goodbyes are in order, they’re clamming up.

“Yeah...yeah, I’ll pick you up in the morning,” Steve says brightly, finding a topic of conversation. “Since your car is back at school...”

“Oh. Yeah, yeah...”

Steve claps Jonathan on the back a little too enthusiastically with a loud ‘see you’, and then is about to head to his car when it happens. The moment that Steve will replay in his head all night. The younger boy grabs his shoulder as he turns away and brings him in for a hug. It’s clumsy and messy; Jonathan feels like he holds on for too long, Steve feels like *he* holds on for too long, their hands fumble awkwardly on each other’s back, and they pull away quickly, leaving both of them wanting more.

“Good night,” Steve says hurriedly, making his way back to his car. Jonathan puts up a hand as he pulls away and Steve resists the urge to stop his car, head right back in, and spend the night in that house. When he pulls up in front of his own place, Steve doesn’t go in but stays in his car, replaying the whole afternoon and evening. It’s made him think, seeing the Byers family interact, and he feels a burning jealousy in the pit of his stomach. *First you’re falling for him and now you’re fucking jealous of Jonathan Byers...Steve, you gotta get a grip!* He leans his forehead against the steering wheel, replaying that hug over and over again. *I should’ve kissed him right then...No you shouldn’t have, are you trying to mess up your relationship?...He’s the one who hugged me...So what, that’s not so weird, doesn’t mean anything...*

He ends up falling asleep in his car, waking up only when he accidentally presses on the horn.

To Be Continued...

Notes for the Chapter:

Steve just needs some love! Also, aren't kitchen scenes the best? They're so homey, I love em!

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

Ugh, this chapter was so hard to write. I put it off for ages and went ahead and wrote the entire next chapter before this one, but here it is, finally... Hope it does a good job of showing these babes growing closer which is what it's meant to be :)

Nancy corners Steve a couple of days later, after school, while Jonathan is in the darkroom.

"There you are! And can you stop smoking, please!" She adds irritably, stalking up to him. He takes the cigarette out of his mouth and rolls it between his thumb and index finger.

"What's up? You look like you're on the warpath..." Steve stands up straight from where he is slouching against the school building.

"No, I'm just stressed," Nancy sweeps her curly hair out of her face and sighs. "Okay, I've been meaning to clear this up..."

Steve nods, thinking he knows what's coming, and a moment later, his suspicions are confirmed.

"So, like when was the last time we had sex?" Nancy shoots out, holding his gaze.

"Um...I don't know. Christmas break?" Steve throws out, casually, resting an arm against the wall and drumming his fingers on it. *This is gonna be uncomfortable, but...needs to be done.*

"Yeah...that's nearly two months..." Nancy says analytically. "And when was the last time we made out or even kissed?"

Steve shifts slightly. "I have no idea..."

"Okay, point is, we've pretty much ended our relationship without even talking about it," Her eyes are narrowed, but not in an angry way, just thoughtfully.

"Yeah...I guess," Steve mutters, not sure what he is supposed to say. "Is...is that okay?"

"Yeah, yeah it's fine. I do care about you, Steve, just not in that way anymore. Like I said, we basically ended our thing a while ago, just not officially," Nancy smiles slightly, looking up at him. Steve smiles back feeling a leap of brotherly affection for her.

"Yeah...you...you can date whoever you want, you know? Even Jonathan, I don't mind." *Yes, you do! You'd mind very much, you idiot! Why are you telling her that?*

Nancy grins and punches him in the stomach. "It's not like that with us. I can't believe you can't see it."

"I thought he had a thing for you," Steve says, trying to keep his voice even, though his stomach seems to be dancing the polka. *Okaaaay, Steve. You can calm down. Just because he isn't infatuated with Nancy, does not mean that he likes you! What is wrong with you, dude?...Yeah, well, what about that hug? Huh?...*

Nancy seems to contemplate his words for a minute before answering. "Yeah...I...he definitely did at one point, but I think he's over it. By the way, Steve... we never even cleared this up...nothing did happen that night that he stayed."

"Haven't thought about that in months, honestly. It's fine," Steve says with a laugh. What he fails to mention is that at this point, he'd be much more jealous of Nancy for sleeping with Jonathan than furious at the latter for stealing his girl. *My, my, how things have changed...*

"Yeah, well I thought you should know. He literally slept in my bed and that was it. Didn't even get under the covers..." They both share a laugh at the shy boy's expense.

"I'm telling you...he's probably the only guy in this goddamn town who wouldn't try anything on you," Steve adds when they've calmed down.

"Yeah...probably true," Nancy says turning to look him in the eye again. "It'll be nice to just be friends, the three of us, won't it? I know

I'm not even thinking about dating for a nice long while."

"Gotta recover from me, huh?" Steve jabs, raising an eyebrow.

"No! I need to recover from the insanity that happened in November," Nancy's tone is serious and her face falls slightly. When she continues talking, it's barely a whisper. "And I want you guys at my side for that. You two are everything to me now. My family...they don't...it's just not the same, they've never been supportive and Mike is mourning that girl, Eleven, that they lost so I have to be there for him. It's...I just...I need you guys."

"Hey..." Steve glues an arm around her. "Don't worry, we're not going anywhere, alright? We'll stick together."

"Yeah," Nancy smiles, patting his back slightly before extracting herself. "You know, it's funny. Cuz' last week Jonathan told me how you and I didn't need to 'hold back' when he was around, and that's what first made me think about it."

Steve nods, mildly interested, letting an ant crawl onto his finger where it had resettled on the brick wall. A moment later Jonathan comes around the side of the building, heading towards them.

"Can I see them?" Nancy questions, nodding at the stack of pictures in his hand when he gets a little closer.

"Yeah..." Jonathan hands them over and then stuffs his hands into his pockets.

"Hey! Who took this one?" Nancy cries out a moment later, brandishing a photo. It's of Jonathan and the cat, the one Steve took.

"Steve," Jonathan answers guiltily, shifting slightly, away from Nancy.

"Can I get a copy? It's so cute, and I literally don't have a single picture of you," she says enthusiastically, glancing at Steve.

"Why do you need one?" Jonathan says moodily. "I mean, you see me every day..."

“So what? You have plenty of pictures of your family and of us. You see us every day too,” Nancy counters.

Jonathan just shrugs and waves his hand. “Whatever, keep it. I don’t need it.”

Steve struggles with himself before bursting out. “Can I have one too?” *Dammit, man!* But Steve can't resist; the look on Jonathan's face as he holds the cat is too sweet and soft.

“Yeah, I’ll make you a copy,” Jonathan mutters, glancing at him sullenly. “What do you want one for anyway?”

“Just want to see your pretty face, you know...” Steve brushes a hand through his hair, playing it cool. *He’s in a mood*, Steve thinks. Jonathan often got into ‘moods’ as Nancy and Steve dubbed them, where he was more surly than usual, asking them why they were hanging out with him, and generally down on life. These are the times when Steve usually heeds Nancy’s advice and cuts out most of the teasing and banter.

Jonathan snorts and looks away uneasily.

“Hey, make two copies, while you’re at it,” Nancy says loudly, grabbing his arm. “You should have one too.”

“That’s even more ridiculous, why do I need a picture of myself?” Jonathan mutters, brushing his hair, not out of his face, like the rest of the world, but right into his eyes, hiding them pretty effectively.

“Don’t be an idiot, Jonathan...” Nancy says, her voice getting harsher. “We’re not interested in one of your self-deprecation sessions.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Jonathan says, prying the rest of the pictures out of her hand. “You guys don’t need to wait for me.”

Steve and Nancy share an eye roll. “We’re waiting for you. Get over it,” Steve says. “We’re going out, remember?”

Jonathan’s shaking his head. “Nah, I think I’ll just-“

But just what he thinks he'll do, they never find out. Steve shocks himself by sneaking behind the younger boy and clamping a hand over his mouth.

"You're coming with us, and you can't stop it," Steve whispers, suddenly very aware of what he just did; that his hand is covering Jonathan's mouth and his arms are around him...

Jonathan squirms out of his grasp and glares at Steve from behind his wall of hair. Nancy could feel the tension ratcheting up so she quickly flings an arm around him. "Calm down, both of you. Let's just go."

They head over to his car, her arm still around Jonathan, Steve looking on, kind of jealous. *Why can she do that but if I so much as get near him, all hell breaks loose?...You know very well why...It's because you're a guy, and guys don't touch their friends like that...*

The drive to their chosen destination, the bowling alley, is uneventful and they troop in, scouting out the scene.

"Oh shit," Jonathan mutters, spotting a large group from school. He also cursed more when he was in a 'mood'. "Can we just go?...I'll go if you guys want to stay. You'll get less trouble if..."

"For the last time Byers, shut the fuck up!" Steve yells, losing his patience. "We. Don't. Care. Okay?"

Jonathan finally does shut up, looking angrier than usual and they take the last lane on the left side, far away from any other bowlers, their closest neighbor, a family of four, five lanes over. They go a few rounds with Jonathan's sour mood pervading the atmosphere, making the activity distinctly un-enjoyable, even without him saying a word. Finally, Nancy gets up in a huff and mutters something about getting drinks.

Jonathan hunches over in a seat, staring gloomily down the lane at the fresh set of bowling pins, his eyes glazed over. Steve shakes his head and sits down beside the younger boy, spreading his arm out behind the seats.

“So what’s up Byers?”

“Huh?” Jonathan barely glances over.

“You’ve got this angry dark cloud, hanging over you. It’s kinda hard not to notice,” Steve says, starting to shake his foot nervously.

“I thought I always do,” Jonathan says humorlessly, still staring off into space.

“Not like now. Normally it’s like you’re begging for a hug, but now it’s like you want us to leave you alone and let you sulk in peace.”

Jonathan smiles slightly at this but quickly slips back into his usual glower and shrugs.

“Come on man...Is something up?” Steve presses, wishing the other boy would just snap out of it. He hated dealing with this stuff and Nancy seemed too annoyed to handle Jonathan herself. “Come on, did someone give you trouble today? You can tell us...” He continues, carefully avoiding saying ‘me’, because that would make things a bit too personal.

Jonathan gives him a long-suffering look and rubs a hand over his face slowly, but still doesn’t talk.

Steve takes the plunge and moves his hand from the back of the chair to Jonathan’s shoulder, as casual as can be, though his heart is pounding. *Dude, you’re in the bowling alley, not his house, or the woods, or the car....anyone can see you.*

But suddenly Steve finds that he honestly doesn’t care. It’s like a revelation, surprising even himself, and he almost smiles at the thought. “So...you gonna talk or...”

Jonathan drops his head for a moment, the picture of dejection, before looking sideways and meeting Steve’s eye. “Okay, fine. Here you go. You ever feel this constant knot in your stomach? Just dread...for no damn reason?”

Steve shakes his head, unsure where this is going but sticking with it.

"Yeah, well, I didn't think so. But that's what I have all the time in school...around town...right now, alright? Never goes away. It's gotten a little better with you guys, but it's still there. I feel like everyone's staring at me, and judging, which they are, I can't think straight, I can't talk, I can't relax...you name it...Some days are worse than others when I can't just 'snap out of it', and today is one of those days. My mind...I just think very negatively, okay? I always imagine the worst, I can't see a way out, I can't just think about happy things. I get stuck. There's nothing you can do to help that."

Steve nods, not knowing what to say; he's never discussed anything like this. "Is that why you never eat in school?"

Jonathan nods quickly, relieved that Steve isn't laughing and actually seems to get it. "Yeah. I...It's too...I don't know myself." His head slumps again and he rests his forehead on his palm. "Sorry. There's nothing really to do or say. I just...I don't know."

Steve pats his back for a moment before removing his hand. "It's okay, man. Does music help? Is that why you're always listening to doom and gloom?"

Jonathan smiles for a moment, turning his head to glance at Steve. "Yeah. Sort of. I prefer the term calming, though."

Steve grins, half-wishing he hadn't removed his hand. And then the hammer falls:

"Don't tell Nancy," Jonathan mutters, seeing her approaching. "She... she'll go all...you know her. She'll try to cheer me up, reason with me and everything..."

"Yeah," Steve answers quickly, his stomach flipping on him, growing warm. *Does he actually trust me more than her?...don't be stupid...* "You got it. How's the cat doing, by the way?"

"Oh," Jonathan perks up and sits a little straighter as Nancy arrives and sets a couple of coca-cola cans on his lap. "We're keeping her. Chester doesn't mind, so that was kinda the tipping point. She's pretty sleepy, though. Not much fun."

“Just like you, you mean,” Steve smirks.

Jonathan actually smiles and elbows him. It’s the best Steve has ever felt, getting elbowed. He winks at Nancy. “I worked my charm with him,” he says loudly. “Right Byers?”

“Yeah, sure...” Jonathan says, popping open a can, with a nod of thanks to Nancy.

“So what are you naming her?” she asks, taking a sip out of her own drink; water, all thought of their game temporarily forgotten.

Jonathan shrugs. “Lily,” he says, blushing.

“And what’s so embarrassing about that?” Nancy pursues, getting up and hefting a large black and red, swirly ball in her hands, testing its weight.

“It was my grandma’s name. She’s gone, passed away a few years back,” he mutters, taking another swig and leaning back. “Funny thing is, she hated cats, so who knows? Maybe it’s an insult to her memory.”

Steve chuckles, looking for something nice to say, but Nancy beats him to it. “I think it’s sweet. I like the name Lily.”

Jonathan suddenly jumps up. “Oh God, we need to leave!” he calls out urgently.

Steve looks at him confused. “What the hell, man? I thought you were good.”

“It’s not that, it’s this...this song!” Jonathan says wildly. He looks like he’s being physically threatened by a machete-wielding madman.

Steve bursts out laughing, doubling over, and actually falling off his chair. Nancy gives him a good kick just for fun, before turning to Jonathan. “So go outside and come back in a couple of minutes.”

Jonathan nods and flees as Cyndi Lauper continues to bellow out of the bowling alley’s speakers.

“Man, he’s funny sometimes,” Steve gasps from the ground, still giggling. “I mean, did you see his face? He looked like...like...” he puts on an exaggeratedly shocked face, to which Nancy just gives an exaggerated sigh, a faint smile playing on her lips.

“It’s a little bit like how you looked when the monster first showed up,” She muses, walking up to the lane and sending a fastball flying, straight down the middle. Like everything, Nancy Wheeler was good at bowling. “Hello!...Hello!...This is crazy!...This is crazy!...” The other two still give Steve a hard time for his behavior during the monster attack.

“Ahh, so now we know how to scare Jonathan Byers. He fights monsters with fire, but threaten him with some Cyndi Lauper and he’s out!”

Steve is still laughing five minutes later when Jonathan returns a little damp, due to a light drizzle that’s falling outside.

“Hi,” he mumbles, picking out a ball for himself, a heavy black one.

“Is that to fit your mood?” Steve pokes, leaning against one of the bolted-down seats, not having the patience to get up.

“Don’t make me drop it on you...” Jonathan steps over the older boy, feigning dropping the ball on his head. Steve ducks and then, on an urge, grabs Jonathan around the knees, tackling him to the ground. Jonathan looks bewildered for a split second before flipping over and pinning Steve under him. The ball falls out of his hands and rolls away, onto the polished wood and into the gutter, making its way pathetically halfway down the lane before coming to a stop. The boys continue tussling for a couple of minutes, Jonathan rather amused but faking irritation, and Steve having the time of his life, as Nancy looks on.

“Honestly...” She mutters, making her way into the lane to retrieve the ball when it comes to a standstill.

When she comes back, they’re both looking flushed and out of breath, their clothes rumpled and their hair messed up. “Okay, now that you’ve had your fun, rolling on the floor like a couple of animals,

maybe you want to behave like adults? I mean, for people who don't wanna make a scene, you're putting on a pretty good show of wanting attention."

Jonathan looks properly ashamed, but Steve just grins idiotically. "We can't help it, Nance. We're aggressive teenage boys, who need some release from our hormonal selves," he says as an explanation, picking up a ball and flinging it down the lane, taking out eight pins. *That's Jonathan-esque humor*, Nancy thinks, biting into a Milky Bar.

They continue the game, eventually giving up on the scoring when they start hurling balls, mindless of whose turn it actually is. Steve at one point challenges Jonathan to see whose gutter ball can reach the end faster, so they each pick up an evenly-weighted ball and send it flying down the sides at the same moment. Steve wins, unsurprisingly, and flexes his muscles until Jonathan pours the remains of his coke all over his arm, grinning haughtily, until hurriedly mopping up the mess with his jacket.

Nancy just watches the antics with a serene smile on her face, rolling her eyes and shaking her head, but enjoying the two goofballs fooling around beside her. It was nice to see them smiling, specifically Jonathan. *Steve Harrington and Jonathan Byers...who knew? And here they are again, brawling in an alley...only they're both smiling this time...*

"So Byers, let's get your professional opinion..." Steve begins on the way home, settling into the passenger seat and turning to Jonathan who's driving. He snatched the front before Nancy could and was intent on bothering Jonathan all the way home. "Queen or Led Zeppelin?"

Jonathan scoffs. "Ha, is that even a question?"

"Humor me," Steve chortles, putting his feet up on the dashboard.

"If you get your mud-caked feet off my dashboard, then I might," Jonathan answers, not even deigning to look at him.

"Come on man! You yourself said that this car is a hunk o' junk," Steve protests, clapping Jonathan on the back, thereby sending the car into a slight swerve.

“A clean hunk of junk,” Jonathan corrects him, righting the car.

Steve grumbles but removes his sneakers, which are indeed filthy, from the dashboard and accosts Jonathan a second later.

“So, let’s hear the music snob’s opinion...”

Jonathan shoots Steve such a withering look that he actually cringes and backs away slightly.

“Who has better vocals, a better guitarist, and a better drummer?” Jonathan states blithely.

“Uh....that’s debatable. I have no idea where you’re going with this...” Steve ventures. “Queen?”

“No! Led Zeppelin, obviously! Bonham, Jones, Page, and Plant! He’s way better than Freddie Mercury.”

“WHAT?!! NO WAY!...” Steve mouths at Jonathan for a few moments wordlessly. “This is Freddie Mercury we’re talking about here! FREDDIE FUCKING MERCURY!!!!

Nancy sighs from the backseat, utterly bored by the conversation, while Steve continues. “I’m telling you, Byers, there is no way, NO WAY, that you’re gonna convince me that Plant is better than Mercury!”

“Listening to Queen gives me a headache, honestly,” Jonathan casually shoots out, turning onto Maple. “Plant is way more relaxing.”

“What?!! What?!!” Steve exclaims, gesticulating madly. “A headache?! It’s over, me and you, it’s over! Mercury gives you a headache?! This, from the same guy who listens to that Summer guy howling into a mic! And all your other suicidal bands wailing about death and destruction...I guess you think that the...the Clasher is better than all of them?”

Jonathan’s giggling over the steering wheel by the time Steve finishes his tirade. “His name is Strummer, and it’s ‘the Clash’, which I’m sure you know, but you’re trying to irritate me by getting the name

wrong... Anyway, yeah, Plant is way more pleasant to listen to, and-

He's interrupted by Nancy kissing his cheek from behind.

"Well, you two can carry on..." She mutters with a grin, turning her head to kiss Steve on the cheek. Both boys are bewildered for a second and then realize that they're outside the Wheeler house.

"Oh, right," Jonathan says quickly. "Sorry, Nancy."

"No, no, it's funny to watch," Nancy answers, getting out of the car. "Really, it's okay," She adds, seeing their guilty faces. "I'll see you guys tomorrow!"

They wave and watch her until she lets herself into the house before Jonathan pulls away from the curb. "I totally forgot about her," he says regretfully, biting his lip.

"She's cool, man. She really doesn't care. She just likes seeing you smile..." Steve says. *Oops...that sounded a little too soft...I just like seeing you smile...* "Besides, she understands what it's like to be utterly consumed by my magnetic charm."

Jonathan smiles but still looks concerned.

"You know, me and her officially broke up today," Steve throws out, watching the other boy's reaction closely.

"She seems pretty happy about it," Jonathan says slyly, glancing over at Steve.

"Eh, it was nothing...we were already you know..." Steve shrugs. "ANYWAY!... You nicely sneaked in a subject change, but I'm not letting you get away with it. Plant better than Mercury...I can't even talk to you about that one..." Steve shakes his head in disbelief. "... And I guess you'll just ignore Brian May?"

"I'm not ignoring him," Jonathan protests, taking one hand off the wheel and holding it up in defense. "Brian May is good, but Jimmy Page is better."

"Yeah, you know, I could agree with that, except...I can't really

respect your opinions anymore..." Steve grumbles, leaning back.

Jonathan raises an eyebrow. "Oh, so up until now you did respect my opinion?"

They continue bickering all the way to Steve's house, where Jonathan pulls into the circular driveway. Steve's about to get out of the car when a moment of daring overcomes him and he leans over, grabbing Jonathan in a firm embrace. relieved when he feels Jonathan's hand slip around his back immediately. The younger boy looks slightly surprised but somewhat pleased too, Steve notes as he lets go. *That wasn't so bad... It was a lot less awkward than Tuesday... Which is not saying much...*

"Good night," he calls, slamming the door shut. Jonathan acknowledges him with a small wave and then pulls away, leaving Steve staring after him, dreading his lonely, cold house.

That was just the beginning of the three's friendship. Over the next two months, they become inseparable. Steve and Jonathan take turns picking each other up in the morning because one of their cars is always getting left in the school parking lot when they go out after classes. It becomes rare to see any one of the three without one of the others. They spend every lunch break at their site in the woods which they spruce up with cushions and a makeshift canopy. After a couple of weeks, Jonathan even starts bringing something to eat, which makes Steve feel all warm and fuzzy inside, though he wisely says nothing. Weeknights are spent roaming around town, frequenting all the local attractions with the bowling alley becoming their favorite haunt; they practically claim the last lane on the left as their own. They go to the theater too, fairly often, working out a compromise to fit their vastly different movie tastes, where they take turns choosing the feature. They also hang out at each others' houses daily, with Steve's visit to the Byers changing their hangout landscape drastically. Now they spend most of their time at Jonathan's place, and sometimes, when his parents aren't home, at Steve's house. The Wheelers are cut out of the rotation completely when all three of them grow tired of Karen's I-disapprove-but-I-will-hold-my-tongue

looks that she shoots them any chance she's got.

The kids get used to seeing the three together, although they never really stop teasing Steve, besides Will, knowing his history. They have a couple of joint slumber parties at the Byers which include many pillow-fights, gooey chocolate chip cookies, movie debates, and even a D&D tournament. Steve shares a lot of the kids' taste and is a dork at heart, so they actually get along, although Mike never quite warms up to him. Nancy and Jonathan stick together during these rowdy events, talking quietly in a corner, as Steve entertains the masses with tales of his many wild escapades.

Steve becomes a pro at dicing onions, among other things, and quickly appoints himself Jonathan's kitchen help, which he not-so-secretly loves but whines a lot about. Jonathan protests at the beginning but then comes around when Steve starts eating there half the time and is never shy about asking for seconds. Joyce tries not to appear too enthusiastic about everything, but she is beyond thrilled at the turn-around in Jonathan's social life. She's quick to bestow hugs on the extra two teens who seem to always be around and Steve slowly loosens up around her. It's not long before he's chatting her up every chance he's got and it certainly helps that they're both avid M*A*S*H and *Dallas* fans.

On weekends, the three venture further out, exploring all that Indiana has to offer, as well as traveling into Kentucky, Illinois, and Missouri a couple of times, with Nancy doing most of the legwork for their trips. All of their walls get covered in pictures of their jaunts, courtesy of Jonathan, though he is noticeably missing from most of the photos, and they spend hours rehashing their outings and planning their summer vacation.

Much to Nancy's disapproval, Steve and Jonathan take to cutting any classes they don't like, together and hanging out in the woods or the car instead, chatting, taking photos, sleeping, or planning their next adventure. It's odd, because of how things started, but Jonathan and Nancy hardly ever hang out alone anymore. They're the two busy ones, of the three, so there's rarely a time when they're available but Steve isn't.

Sleepy Hawkins does not fail to notice these developments, far from

it, they become the talk of the town, specifically at the high school. Never before, perhaps in the history of Hawkins, has there been such an odd friendship between three such different people and never before has there been such a downward social spiral for someone as popular as Steve. The rumors about them abound and they have to field thinly-veiled comments about threesomes and fags, daily. It bothers Steve the most, but he does an admirable job of ignoring the jibes, helped along by the other two. Tommy's 'troubled trio' comment becomes everyone's favorite catchphrase to use around them and it's often that they hear calls of "troubled trio alert" as they're walking down the school corridors or anywhere around town, for that matter.

Steve tries to control himself around Jonathan, but it doesn't always work. He slips up periodically, sometimes making quite the suggestive remark, but is usually able to cover up with a loud, witty comment or two. There are a few times, though, that he can feel Nancy looking at him strangely and he has to avoid catching her eye for a while after.

One such time was at the theater a few weeks into March. It was Nancy's turn to pick a movie and so, naturally, there they were, slaving through another romantic comedy, which the boys considered some evil form of torture. A while in, Jonathan fell asleep and his head came to rest on Steve's shoulder (Steve sat in the middle these days). Steve spent most of the movie watching the younger boy breathing and it was during some hot kissing scene that Nancy looked over and saw that he was hardly paying attention.

"Steve, do you like him?" She'd asked quietly.

Steve had been infinitely glad that Nancy could barely see his face, and the particular shade it had taken on, as he answered, straining to keep calm. "Of course I like him. He's a good guy." Nancy had let it go, but Steve had made an effort for a couple of weeks to keep things super-casual between the two of them.

Luckily, for Steve, Jonathan doesn't seem to or pretends not to notice any of his comments and laughs off whatever it is he said. It becomes routine for them to clap each other on the back, and even hug, much to Steve's delight, though seeing Will and his buddies interact makes

him realize that Jonathan just sees it as a normal thing to do with your guy-friends. Still, he likes to fantasize about it meaning more and he takes what he can get. A couple of times, Jonathan would even take the initiative and sling his arm around him, and that's when Steve would wonder if there was anything there. He knows he could cheer Jonathan up like no one else could and the thought brings a smile to his face, but still...

What is real enough is the fact that he and Jonathan are getting closer than either of them are with Nancy. They spend the most time together, they enjoy arguing about the same things and have many inside jokes that even Nancy isn't privy to. To her credit, she isn't in the least bit jealous, though Jonathan worries about her all the time, and she even encourages the two to spend time without her. As the school year drags on, she becomes more and more engrossed in studying and college applications, leaving the two of them alone, with lots of time to kill.

It's on one of these nights in early-April when Steve decides to carry out his plan. His parents are (once again) not home, so he and Jonathan crash at his house after school, settling in for a long afternoon/evening of old comedies that Steve digs up. He introduces the beer an hour in, and slowly but surely, they surround themselves in empty cans, growing tipsier with each passing minute, until all they can do is giggle stupidly at anything and everything.

Steve sidles over to the stereo and slips in his chosen record, a *Generation X* album he swiped from Jonathan's room earlier in the week, casually returning to sit down beside Jonathan on the couch. *Gotta butter him up first...*

"Hey Byers, show me some moves..." he calls out lazily.

Jonathan laughs and waves his arms around mechanically for a minute, not even bothering to get up. "That's all I have," He says afterward, popping open another can of beer. "I'm not a dancer, by any stretch of the imagination."

"I'll have to make you into one, then," Steve grins, grabbing his arm and yanking him up. He forces Jonathan into a whole series of moves that look out of place on the awkward boy, but they're laughing their heads off and by the time, Steve pops the offending record into the stereo and it begins to play, Jonathan is too hyper to even care about the music selection. *Though, if it was Cyndi Lauper...*

Steve rubs his hands together and gives himself a pat on the back, watching the younger boy mess around to the song and then decides that it's time for some heckling.

"Hey Byers, do you know what you're doing right now?" he calls out.

"Not really," Jonathan says grinning widely. "Am I being really ridiculous?"

"Yep. In fact, so ridiculous, that you're dancing to Footloose..."

Steve bursts out laughing at the horrified look on Jonathan's face as it dawns on the younger boy that he's right. "Remember all that talk of how you'd never be caught dead..."

"Oh God, you got me!" Jonathan groans into his hands. "I let my guard down for a second, and this is what happens..."

Steve is enjoying the other boy's misery immensely and isn't holding back. "This must really bring up some identity issues, huh?"

Jonathan glares at him, but it doesn't last long and the scowl quickly reverts back into a smile. "Well, I concede, you got me."

"Ha! Just be happy I didn't get any footage like I promised. I've got a kind soul."

"Yeah, you do," Jonathan says quietly, still grinning, but staring at Steve who's just a couple of feet away.

Steve's chest seems to constrict and he becomes aware of the furious pounding of his heart because, in that moment, he swears he can see *something* in Jonathan's eyes.

To kiss or not to kiss, that is the question...

But the answer is made up for him when Jonathan speaks up again loudly, shattering the moment. “Well, I am on like fifteen beers, so you can cut me a little slack.”

“No way in hell, Byers. You’re gonna be hearing about this for years,” Steve fires back with a bit of a forced grin. *Gah! Am I ever gonna work this out? How will I ever know if it’s mutual?...*

To Be Continued...

Notes for the Chapter:

Hope this lived up to the wait... Please let me know
:D

Thank you all for reading, appreciate the support.

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

Strong Homophobic language ahead, so beware...

The night Steve realizes that the feeling is mutual, is also the night he gets beaten up.

Steve staggers out of the house, numb and trembling. He just makes it to his car and spends a good three minutes trying to get the key to turn, before collapsing in the driver's seat and pulling the door closed after him. He can barely see, for some reason, and can taste blood in his mouth, not to mention the fact that his breathing is labored and loud in his ears, and his chest feels like an elephant just stomped on it.

It takes five minutes of recovery time until he starts the car and pulls unsteadily out onto the road. He knows he shouldn't be driving in the condition he's in, that he's a hazard to the road and to himself, but he needs to get away, far, far away, from his house and the person in it. Luckily it's late, 1:48, according to the dashboard, so there aren't many cars out and about. Steve realizes he's swerving in and out of his lane so he pulls over for a minute to breathe. *Should I go to the hospital? No, you can't...too many questions...* The rational part of his mind knows he should go, that he very much needs it, but the emotional part won't allow it.

He gets back onto the road and finds his hands guiding the car on their own. They take him on a short ride to a now familiar dirt road just over a mile from his house. Steve pumps the brakes, coming to a full stop before the house is in sight and tries to re-evaluate what he's doing, but his head won't cooperate and all he can think is that he needs to see...*what do I need to see again?* His breathing is getting more and more difficult by the second and his train of thought is heading that way too. His whole face stings and the three or four times he's tried to touch it, he's pulled away quickly due to the pain.

He's dizzy, very dizzy...

Steve stumbles out of the car, gasping for air. *That's better*...he thinks hazily, leaning against the left side door. It's a late-April night, crisp and cool, with the occasional gust of wind and the fresh air is exactly what he needs. The temporary clearing of his mind gives him the boost he needs to walk up the path and soon enough the house is in view. There are no lights on, much to Steve's disappointment, but then a deep corner of his brain reminds him that Jonathan's room is out back. He takes a shallow, rattling breath, trying to ignore the pounding of his head, the stinging of his skin, the fact that he can only see out of one eye, the blood that he can taste on his lips...and makes his way around back, almost crying in relief at the sight of the yellow light pouring out of a window that he knows is home to Jonathan's room.

One step at a time, he makes his way over, briefly stopping to question what he's doing, but letting his heart win out. He needs to see someone, some normalcy, a friendly face...a...something. The window is open and he can hear some faint, calming music emanating out of it before he even spots the other boy. Jonathan is lying on his bed, reading, one arm behind his head, the other hand anchoring the book on his chest. A furry, tan blanket is pulled up around his waist and he's wearing an undershirt that, under different circumstances, would have Steve's mind and heart racing.

Jonathan never bothers closing the shades, due to the fact that his window opens to the backyard and the only people who can see in are those actively seeking to do so, and him being who he is, who would want to do that?

For this, Steve is grateful, as he watches Jonathan flip a page, his fingers having to contort due to it being a one-handed maneuver. A minute or two later, the boy's eyes begin to drift close, only to snap back open a moment later. Jonathan yawns, shuts his book, and gets out of bed and this time Steve, even in the terrible state that he's in, doesn't fail to notice that the other boy is in his boxers, which are quite tight and are hugging his...

Steve's wild train of thought is interrupted by a loud gasp from the other boy. He tears his eyes away from the arousing sight and looks

up to see Jonathan staring at him like he's seeing a ghost. It's five full seconds before Jonathan's face relaxes as he identifies the guy at his window and he hurries over, his face switching from shocked to anxious.

Steve begins to panic. He only meant to look, not to let the other boy see him, but at that moment, when Jonathan peers down at him, his face tight with worry, he just wants to fall into him and spill everything.

"Steve! What happened, man?" Jonathan whispers, his voice a little scratchy, due to disuse.

Steve opens his mouth to answer, but the words won't come, and it's all he could do to stop the tears that have suddenly gathered in his eyes, from spilling. Jonathan opens the window an additional foot and reaches a hand out.

"Here," he says, offering it to the older boy who takes it.

Steve takes a moment to gather himself and speaks for the first time, in a voice he barely recognizes. "I...I don't think I can..." he says, gesturing with his free hand at the window.

Jonathan nods in understanding. "I'll get the door, come around..." Then he lets go of the other's hand, leaving Steve feeling an emptiness that he can't explain. He needs to feel something...he needs something solid to hold onto...to let him know that the last few hours are not all that's left, that there is still something or someone out there...that he's not alone...

He said to come around to the front...

Right, Steve thinks, pulling himself away from the window with an effort. He makes his way back around, where Jonathan's already opened the door and is looking around. Thankfully, Steve notes, he's put on a pair of sweatpants. Jonathan spots Steve's labored steps, as he tries to make his way to the door, and he runs over, hooking his arm under the older boy's and around his back, allowing Steve to rest his head on his shoulder.

“Steve....just hang on for another minute...” Jonathan mutters, helping him over the threshold and into the house. He stops at the couch, meaning to sit Steve down there, but the other boy shakes his head.

“Not here...your room...please...”

Jonathan obliges and helps Steve the few feet to his room, closing the door after them with his foot and leading him over to the bed, where he proceeds to drop down on it.

Jonathan immediately goes over to his closet and takes something out that Steve can't see, but he hears strange clicking and snapping sounds and that's followed up by the unmistakable cocking of a gun.

“Jonathan...what are you...?”

“Who did this?” Jonathan spits out in a quiet fury, turning around, his face an angry shade of red.

“Jonathan...stop it...what do you think you're...what are you gonna do with that?” Steve realizes that he's got a slight lisp and it hurts to talk, hurts to breathe, hurts to think...

“Steve. Who did this?” Jonathan repeats, glaring at him.

“My...my...” Steve attempts, but he can't get the next word out. Jonathan seems to understand, though. He puts the gun down on the desk and stares at Steve, his face turning pale and his jaw tightening, before seeming to make up his mind.

“Let's go...” He mutters, holding his hand out to Steve who looks up at him confused.

“Wha...”

“The hospital. You need one, and then I'm going to the police and we're gonna have that motherfucker arrested.”

Steve briefly registers the fact that Jonathan just used the word ‘motherfucker’, before shaking his head. “No...no, man...I...we can't. I'm just...I'll head home,” he finishes, starting to get up. Jonathan

forces him back down on the bed and holds him there gently.

“Steve...you’re not going back to your place. You’re not going anywhere near that guy again if I can help it. Why won’t you go to the hospital?” Jonathan asks, sitting down beside Steve on the bed.

“I...too many questions...I can’t do it...” Steve mumbles, avoiding Jonathan’s eyes. The understanding and the fury in them are too much for him to handle and he knows he won’t hold out long under that gaze. “I thought...I thought you would...you’d know how it is...”

Jonathan sighs and puts an arm around Steve’s hunched back, patting him distractedly. “Yeah...yeah...okay...um...okay, we won’t go... wait here, I’ll be back in a second.”

He leaves the room and returns a moment later with a couple of wet hand-towels and a cup of water. “Okay, here, drink.”

He puts his arm back around Steve’s shoulders as the older boy drinks the cool liquid, gratefully. His head already feels clearer than it has all night and he turns to Jonathan shakily, about to tell him that he feels better and can leave...

But Jonathan’s getting up. “Lay down,” he orders and Steve follows automatically. The younger boy sits back down, reaches out a hand, and begins feeling his face. Steve can barely feel the other boy’s touch, but his fingers are cold and soothing and so gentle that the tears are resurfacing before he can stop himself.

Get a grip man. You don’t want to have an epic breakdown in front of him...do you? But in a way Steve does...

Jonathan’s talking to him again. “Is it okay if I cut this open?” he’s asking, pointing at Steve’s t-shirt which is plastered to his chest, blood-stained and sweaty.

“Huh?” Steve wheezes, barely following anymore.

“I don’t want to pull it over your head...your face is too...is it okay if I cut it?”

“Oh...yeah...I...I really don’t give a damn...” Steve says, struggling to

breathe. His chest is rising and falling rapidly, his head is throbbing, his face is raw, and his whole body feels like it's burning up.

Jonathan retrieves a pair of scissors from his desk and begins to cut the t-shirt from the waist up, encountering difficulty once reaching the ribs, where the tee is sticking to Steve's skin. He slips his hand in and gently begins to pry it loose, earning a gasp from Steve.

"Sorry, Steve...I'll try to be more careful...needs to be done," Jonathan mumbles apologetically.

Steve nods his head forcefully, causing it to spin. "No, man...it's, it's okay..." And he doesn't know why, but soon he's gripping Jonathan's shoulder tightly, his fingernails digging into the younger boy's skin. All he knows is that he doesn't want Jonathan to go away...he can't go away because he's the only thing keeping him sane...the only thing anchoring him...the only thing keeping him from collapsing and throwing in the towel...

Jonathan doesn't seem to mind the hand clamped on his shoulder and continues working, prying the t-shirt free, slowly but surely. Once done, he finishes cutting it open and pulls the two sides away, revealing the ugly mess beneath.

"Oh...shit..." He mutters, looking down at the mixture of blood, bruising, and swelling on Steve's chest, which closely resembles his face.

Steve stares at Jonathan as he reaches over for the wet towels and begins gently wiping the blood off his chest. Time seems to freeze and the only sounds in the room are those of Steve's strenuous breathing and the faint rustling of the cloth rubbing against his skin.

Steve is so out of it that he barely even registers that he's lying mostly shirtless on Jonathan Byers' bed, something he could only fantasize about mere hours ago.

Jonathan carefully puts a hand around Steve's head, cradling and holding it steady, as he begins on his face. Steve's still holding onto the other boy's shoulder with an iron-grip that must be leaving marks. It's in sharp contrast to Jonathan's touch, which is so light and

careful that Steve's numbed senses have to strain to feel it. When the younger boy reaches up to brush a sweaty, blood-caked strand of hair out of his face, Steve meets his eye. He can see the care and sadness in it and suddenly he can't help it anymore. His swollen lips start to tremble and the tears that have been threatening to spill all night, start leaking out and sliding down the sides of his face. He takes a deep rattling breath, trying to calm himself down, but when he exhales shakily, and Jonathan starts stroking his hair in response, it only serves to speed up his collapse. As the tears continue to escape, heavy and bitter, he finds himself pushing Jonathan's hands away and sitting up, swaying dizzily as he does.

"I...I shouldn't have come here...mistake to...I don't know what..." he gasps, in between crying, his one working eye blurred by tears, his sweaty bare chest heaving. But as he tries to get up, Jonathan pulls him down and enfolds him in a gentle hug, one that makes Steve lose any control he still has over his emotions. The tears speed up and soon he's sobbing into Jonathan's shoulder as the other boy holds him, one hand tangled in his hair, supporting his head, and the other one patting his back comfortingly.

"Steve...you're staying here tonight. You'll be okay...you'll make it through this," Jonathan whispers in his ear. It's what Steve's been craving all night and it makes him shake harder, makes him sob harder, makes his ragged breaths all the more uneven, makes him reach his arms around Jonathan's back and grip the other boy like it's the last time he'll see him.

They stay locked in an embrace for ages it seems to Steve, but he can't really tell time anymore. The only sounds in the room are those of his devastating sobs and they seem to fill his mind, the perfect soundtrack to the night's events. His face is buried in Jonathan's exposed shoulder and he's barely conscious of anything other than the feeling of the younger boy pressed against him and his strong arms wrapped tenderly around his body. His face is burning, stinging and swollen, his eyes are streaming, his nose is running, and his mouth is pressed into the crook of Jonathan's arm, but he can't find it within himself to care because he knows the other boy doesn't. And he knows this isn't normal, he knows for a fact that no other teenage boy in Hawkins would hold and touch him like Jonathan is now, and

he knows what it means...

"I know how it is, Steve," Jonathan is murmuring to him. "I'm not gonna say it's okay; it's definitely not okay, but eventually it will be. We'll figure this out."

Steve finally let's go, giving Jonathan the cue he needs to do the same, but he keeps a hand on the older boy's shoulder, letting him know that he's still there.

Way to go, man! Completely losing it... Hey, when'd you get back? ... What, not happy to have me?...Well, If you're back then I guess I'm doing a bit better... Steve looks up and is embarrassed to find that Jonathan's eyes are wet too. But there's also that niggling thought, that euphoria...*That's on my behalf...*

He's still trembling and the tears are still falling, but erratically. "I... I...thanks...I..." he trails off, unable to find fitting enough words to say to the guy he just slobbered all over. He drops his face into his hand a moment later, trying to hide the fact that he's starting to cry all over again. *Get a grip, Steve...* but he can't get a grip. His father just messed his face up and beat the shit out of him and he's not okay.

Jonathan is unfazed and doesn't hesitate, throwing his arm around Steve's back once again, adjusting to allow the older boy to rest his head on his shoulder. "Do you...do you wanna talk about it?" he questions, unsure.

Steve nods imperceptibly, but perhaps perceptibly enough for Jonathan, who continues. "Is...is this the first time?"

"Yeah...I mean, no...it's the first time it's this bad," Steve mumbles, sitting up straight and wiping his face. He finds the talking to be distracting, in a good way, despite the grim subject matter. "I mean, he's hit me before, just not like this. I've never been beaten. Especially not...not for a long time. I'm 17 for fuck's sake..."

Jonathan's watching him intently and nods when he appears to have finished. "What...I mean, what brought it on?"

At this, Steve goes silent and takes a moment to breathe, wondering

what to say. He doesn't want to scare Jonathan away but what is he supposed to say? "He...a guy at work said something about seeing the two of us...something about...he said...said he saw my arm around you...and...y'know...seemed to think we were..." he looks up and meets Jonathan's eye. "So I was sitting on the couch, watching a movie, and he suddenly bursts into the house...he said he was gonna beat the fag out of me, and...and then he was on me. I don't even know what happened. I never knew he was this strong, and he's just pummeling me into the couch, and I...It was like I couldn't move, you know? I was just frozen in place...so he just kept fucking me up. Hit my chest a few times...I couldn't breathe and he kept pounding my face in, kept yelling at me to fight back 'like a man'...Eventually, he had enough and left the room and that's when...that's when I was finally able to move. I barely made it to the car and...well...this was the first place I could think of."

Steve smiles for the first time that night, a gruesome sight, given his current condition. "I didn't really mean to come in and make a whole scene, just wanted to see you, you know? *Dude...that's like an admission...*

Jonathan's not looking at him anymore when he finishes, and Steve only just realizes that he's removed his hand from him. "I...uh...I'll stop hanging out with you if-" He begins, in a low, throaty voice but he's interrupted before he can finish. In that moment, Steve wants to kiss him so badly but he knows he can't, not with his busted lip, swollen eye, and messed up face, it would hurt too much, so he settles for another hug instead. This one's short and sweet, but it conveys what he can't say in words, his fingernails digging painfully into the other boy's back. That the day Jonathan beat him up was perhaps the best day of his life, since it spearheaded the friendship between them. That he would be fucked without the other boy, that his life was better off with Jonathan Byers in it, no matter what the rest of the world thought.

"Fuck him...just fuck him, Jonathan," Steve whispers in other boy's ear instead. *Very articulate, man...*

When he pulls away, it's a bit regretfully, and the two sit in silence for a minute before Jonathan gets up and retrieves his camera, checking to see if there's still film left. Once satisfied, he turns on

Steve who holds up his hands. “Whaddaya want pictures of me like this for?” he asks blearily.

“Um...well, if you ever want to press charges...” Jonathan says quietly, not looking at Steve but down at the camera.

“I’m not...I don’t think I’ll ever...whatever, fine,” Steve finishes up, lowering his hands to allow Jonathan to get the ghastly pictures.

“I think you should take a shower,” Jonathan suggests when that’s done. “You’ve still got a lot of blood and stuff...”

Steve nods but then pauses. “Won’t anyone wake up...?”

“Uh...Will sleeps through the night now, most of the time at least,” Jonathan shrugs. “And my mom...I don’t know. She always has the radio on, because I usually still have music going when she goes to sleep. Besides...I...they get it, Steve. It’s fine. Although if my mom knew then she might take her ax and kill your dad or something...so maybe it is best that she doesn’t know...”

Steve laughs a bit but it quickly turns into a wince when his mouth and cheeks throb in protest. “Yeah...okay...yeah, a shower would be good.”

Jonathan starts rummaging around in his closet for some comfortable clothes. He pulls out a pair of light pajama pants and tosses them onto a chair and follows that up with a black Ramones t-shirt.

“Ha, I’m gonna make you wear a Ramones shirt in your vulnerable state,” he says smugly. Steve smiles weakly, trying to keep his breathing steady. His whole face is really starting to burn and he needs something cool on it soon. Jonathan adds a pair of boxers to the pile, which Steve tries to ignore, some socks, and an aqua-colored towel, and then he gathers it all up and comes back over to Steve.

“You okay to walk?” he asks, seriously.

Steve shrugs and gets up, but starts swaying dangerously, his head spinning. Jonathan quickly places one arm around him and helps him over to the bathroom. Steve leans against the wall, trying desperately to stop himself from vomiting, by taking deep breaths, as Jonathan

starts the shower.

“Is this okay?” he asks a few seconds later. Steve staggers over and feels the water.

“A little cooler...I’m burning up...” Jonathan nods and spins the right knob further left until Steve okays the temperature.

“You wanna give me your shirt...?” the younger boy questions; Steve still has his ripped, filthy t-shirt hanging from his arms. He extracts himself from it with difficulty and hands it to Jonathan, who takes it, looking at Steve closely.

“You sure you’re okay in here?”

Steve nods, willing Jonathan to leave him alone for a bit. He can feel himself breaking down again and he knows he won’t last long.

“Okay, but if you need anything, then don’t hesitate to call me...I’m gonna be in the kitchen, alright?” Jonathan presses. Steve nods again and finally, the younger boy exits the room, closing the door gently behind him, and leaving Steve alone for the first time in a while.

Immediately, he stumbles over to the mirror and stares. It’s the first time he’s seeing himself since being beaten and it shocks him. He can now relate very well to the look Jonathan had on when spotting him at the window. His whole face looks like it was rubbed viciously with sandpaper, to the point where it’s bloodied and blown up. His right eye is swollen shut, black and blue marks already starting to spread outward, his upper lip is split, dried blood caking it, and his hair, too, is plastered to his face in a few places by dried blood.

Steve lets out a trembling breath he doesn’t know he’s been holding in, fogging up the mirror a bit. As he stares at his reflection, he can see his father’s face from earlier that night, can hear his words, dripping with venom, and the tears start to fall again as he raises a trembling hand and touches his face, testing out the severity of his injuries. His heart starts racing wildly and soon he’s freaking out. *What the hell am I gonna do? How...how can I go back there? Where am I gonna..? How...where...who...what...* His head is not working properly and hasn’t been all night and he struggles to remind himself

where he is and what he's up to, as the knot in his chest keeps tightening. *Just calm down...you're by Jonathan...you'll be okay...he's right outside...*

Look at me...I look disfigured...how can I show my face like this?!...Calm down, Steve, just calm down...you're gonna be fine...just give it some time...I can't breathe!... I can't even breathe normally...Steve, relax... take a shower, you'll feel better.

Steve decides to heed his guardian angel's advice, kicks his sneakers off, and strips out of his jeans and boxers. They don't come easily since they both seemed to have been glued on by sweat, but he manages and steps into the shower a moment later. The cool water feels amazing against his flaming skin and for three minutes straight, he just stands under the steady stream, eyes closed and one hand on the wall for balance. He keeps trying to stop crying too, but more and more thoughts pop into his head and he has a hard time stopping himself.

Thank God this shower is a noisy one...

He opens his eyes and looks around for something to use on his face. The shower is home to a few cracked tiles and Steve can see a spider creeping along out of his reach, but he couldn't care less. *This place, in a couple of months, is more of a home than my house has ever been...*

Steve spots a small cardboard box, home to a fresh bar of soap, that he realizes Jonathan just put there. He picks it up and starts on his face, rubbing over it gently and taking frequent breaks to wash the bar clean of all the blood that gets smudged on it. When the bar starts coming up clear, he moves on to his chest where a similar, sticky mess awaits him, though not as severe and not as painful. Steve takes his time, cleaning up, and when he finishes, the bar is a third of its original size. He drops it back into its box and then picks up a bottle in the corner that he thinks is a body wash. It's a generic brand but it smells exactly like Jonathan just smelled when he was pressed up against him (the bottle says ocean breeze) and it makes Steve smile as he squirts a bit onto his hand. He uses it on his hair too, not having the energy to reach over to the other end of the bathtub to retrieve the shampoo. He steps out of the shower and wraps the towel around his waist, sitting down on the edge of the

bathhtub as a wave of fatigue and nausea washes over him.

He must have fallen asleep, because the next thing he knows, there's a tapping on his door.

"Steve, you okay?" Jonathan's calling in. He sounds panicked and Steve quickly collects himself.

"Yeah, I'm...I'm fine. I dozed off," he calls out hurriedly, getting up. He dresses as quickly as he can but stops when it comes to the t-shirt. His face, for the first time all night, feels somewhat okay and he doesn't want to inflame it by pulling the tee over it. He gathers up his stuff and steps out of the bathroom, towel around his shoulders. Now that it's not in the heat of the moment anymore, he's getting self-conscious around Jonathan again.

Jonathan walks over from the kitchen. "You any better?"

"Yeah...yeah, my face doesn't sting as much...still light-headed, but yeah," Steve mutters, trying to focus on Jonathan. "Uh, I didn't want to pull the t-shirt over my head, so--"

The younger boy grins at him. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were just trying to get out of wearing a Ramones shirt," he says, giving Steve a punch on the arm that is so light, it feels more like a tap. "But, yeah, sure. Come on."

Steve follows him back into the bedroom, where he digs into his closet once again and comes out with an oversized flannel shirt. Steve takes it and starts fumbling with the buttons, trying desperately to close them, as Jonathan stuffs the unused t-shirt onto a shelf. When he turns around and sees that Steve hasn't managed to close a single button yet, he walks over and starts doing them up himself.

Oh, God...help!...Wait, isn't this what you want?...Weeeellll, kinda, but no... Steve doesn't know whether to be mortified or thankful, so he settles on a mixture of the two. "Hey man, I could do them by myself..."

Jonathan looks at him, part amusement and part exasperation, and shakes his head. "Yeah, except we'd be here until the sun rises if you

did. I don't think you realize what bad shape you're in. I'm pretty sure you've got a concussion based on how disoriented you are, your face is messed up, you're all bruised and scratched, and you probably have a broken rib too, based on your breathing." Jonathan finishes doing the buttons, stopping just above his midribs, so as not to aggravate the bruising on his chest.

"How do you know all-

"Experience," Jonathan answers before he can complete his question, turning away and pretending to be busy. It's quiet for a couple of minutes before Steve speaks.

"Jonathan...I...I remember now."

The other boy turns back to him, an uncomprehending expression on his face. "What?"

"I remember...fifth grade, I think it was," Steve continues, feeling sick. "You...you came to school with a black eye. I laughed. I fucking laughed at you."

And suddenly he drops his head, unable to meet Jonathan's eye. *You're such a piece of shit, man...when he gets fucked up you laugh, when you get fucked up, he literally buttons your shirt because you can't...*

Steve feels a hand on his shoulder and looks up to find Jonathan's deep brown eyes a foot away from his own watery ones. *Man, you need to eat something salty...after all that crying, you've probably got sodium deficiency or something...*

"It's okay, man. People change. Besides, that's not the worst you did, so don't get all hung up on that," Jonathan adds cheekily.

Steve shakes his head and manages a chuckle as he looks back up. "But really, I-" he's interrupted by a beep from the kitchen.

Jonathan's head whips around. "Oh, that's the oven. I warmed up some food if you want," he mutters, before dashing out of the room. Steve follows, bemused. *This guy is a one-man show.*

When he finally makes it to the kitchen, Jonathan's digging into the refrigerator, and he collapses on a chair, fatigued.

"Hey, do you want a drink?" Jonathan asks, getting up.

"I could use some more water, I think," Steve answers, resting his head on his arm on the table.

"Oh, I meant...drink as in you know 'drink'," Jonathan mutters, opening up a cabinet and holding up a bottle of Jack Daniels. "My mom's stash."

Steve grins and reaches out a hand for it. "Can't say no to that," he sighs, pouring himself a healthy, wobbly cup-full, and handing it back to Jonathan. "Just make sure I don't do anything stupid on this shit."

Jonathan shakes his head and hoists himself onto a counter as Steve starts to drink. "Nah. I don't think it...I think it's already in you. Like my mom, she drinks sometimes...just to...you know, just to forget, but that's all there is to it. She's the same person, just less uptight and worried. And technically that's the same thing my dad did, except...it isn't because he was just a messed up guy."

Steve nods, downing half the cup, and feeling the relief almost immediately, as the whiskey burns his throat. "Yeah..." he coughs. "So where does that leave me?"

"You're fine, man. Why can't you accept that?" Jonathan asks, jumping off the counter and opening up the oven. He pulls out a couple slices of homemade pizza and puts them on the table. "You want?"

Steve breaks into a grin. "Hey, you...you should've, Jonathan." Pizza was his favorite thing the other boy made and Jonathan knew it too. He could feel tears welling up once again as he starts on the pizza, thinking about the guy now sitting opposite him, starting on his own slice. *I don't deserve him.*

"You deserve whatever you get, Steve," Jonathan says, maintaining eye contact with the older boy. "I...I...you don't know what you do

for me either. We don't talk about it...but...you...I can't really put it into words..." Jonathan shrugs and smiles at Steve's baffled expression. "Yeah, you said that out loud."

"Oh shit! I didn't mean to," Steve mutters embarrassed, reaching for his cup again and taking another shot.

"Eh...whatever," Jonathan says quietly. "I just said some stuff I wouldn't either normally say. It's just really late...past four...and, you know...it's been a long night."

Suddenly they hear a door creak open and the sound of bare feet on wood. Steve tenses for a second but relaxes when Will trots in, squinting, his hair a wild mess.

"What's going...what happened to you?!" he cries out, running over to look at Steve.

"Hey, don't touch his face!" Jonathan calls out. *That's my job...*

"What happened, Steve?" Will presses, bouncing slightly, now fully awake.

Jonathan's about to intervene, but Steve waves him off, turning to Will. "My dad beat me up," he says casually, adding a little laugh at the end, for effect.

Will's eyes widen and the next thing Steve knows, the little guy clamps his arms around him so tightly, it's painful.

"Hey, little man!" he calls out to the kid who's become a bit like a nephew. "You're crushing me."

Will pulls away, a somber expression on his face. "I'm sorry. About your Dad, not about the hug."

"It's okay," Steve says, patting Will on the head. *I can see why Jonathan does this, it's strangely satisfying, messing up his hair.* He follows that up by swallowing another mouthful of the amber liquid, screwing up his face as it burns. *No, it's clearly not okay and here you are, drinking away your problems just like your fucking old man.*

“Shouldn’t you have ice on your face?” Will pipes up, curling up on a chair and hugging his knees to him.

“Oh, damn!” Jonathan says jumping up. “I completely forgot about that.”

He dashes over to the freezer and comes out with a frozen bag of peas which he presses into Steve’s hand.

“And we also need to get something on your face,” he says, heading to the bathroom and leaving Steve and Will looking after him, a bit bewildered.

“Is he always such a mother hen?” Steve questions, shaking his head.

Will smiles and shrugs. “Yeah. Especially with me. He goes crazy sometimes, babying me. I have to remind him that I’m twelve, not six. But I don’t really mind. He just...he just cares a lot.”

Steve smiles and rubs at his good eye. “Yeah...you’re one lucky guy to have him as your brother.”

“I know,” Will says very seriously. “When I was in the Upside Down I worried a lot about him, and my mom. He...he...it was just the three of us then. He would’ve gone crazy, I think, if I died. So it’s a good thing I didn’t.”

Steve looks at Will closely, trying to make sense of what the boy is babbling on about. “It’s a good thing you didn’t die, because of Jonathan?”

“Yeah,” Will nods his head vigorously.

“Ah, well then, he’s lucky to have you as a brother too.”

Will shrugs modestly. “I don’t know...he likes you a lot too, you know? He cares about you.”

Steve just laughs off the last comment, as Jonathan walks back into the room with supplies.

“Will, back into bed,” he orders.

“What?! I’m...I’m helping out here,” he says, grabbing a bottle Jonathan just brought out and unscrewing it.

“Nice try, bud, but you need to get back to sleep. And Will, don’t tell mom, okay?” Jonathan presses, pulling on a pair of gloves.

Will nods and walks back over to Steve, this time giving him a gentle hug. “At least your hair isn’t ridiculous looking anymore,” he smirks, bopping Steve on the head.

“Hey! Don’t mess with The Hair, that’s my pride and joy right there,” Steve insists, shaking his head in mock disbelief.

“Yeah, whatever you say, good night,” Will says, walking slowly back to his room at the end of the hallway.

“Okay, this is gonna sting, Steve,” Jonathan begins, soaking a sterile cloth with some dangerous looking, clear liquid.

“Oh shit...” Steve mutters clenching his fists. He was a big baby when it came to pain.

“You ready?” Jonathan questions, crouching down beside him.

“Yeah...I...just do it,” Steve mumbles, after downing the rest of the whiskey.

Jonathan presses the cloth against his face and Steve clamps down on his tongue to stop himself from crying out. The younger boy quickly finishes up and pulls his hand back looking at Steve concerned.

“You good?”

“Yeah...goddammit, that stung.”

“Well, you can do your chest,” Jonathan says, wetting another cloth and handing it to Steve who rolls his eyes, sighing. He grits his teeth and presses the damn thing on, relieved that it doesn’t sting half as much as his face did.

Jonathan’s cleaning up around the kitchen when Steve looks up and tries to chuck the cloth into the garbage, but misses.

“Shit! Even my arm isn’t working now!” he swears, trying to get up, but falling back down immediately.

“Steve, you’re drunk.”

“I know...But this is my arm. I kinda like it. I took out that monster with it,” Steve mumbles, yawning.

“You’re not making sense anymore, you need to get to sleep,” Jonathan says, finishing up and grabbing the medical supplies he’d brought out. “Do you wanna wrap your chest? You might have a broken rib, it might help...”

Steve waves his hand and shakes his head, feeling woozy. “No, no... I’m fine.”

“Come on,” Jonathan says, looking at him expectantly, one hand on his hips. Steve struggles to get up and eventually does, with difficulty. They make their way back to Jonathan’s room where the younger boy forces Steve to sit down on the bed, and he notices that Jonathan’s changed the linen while he was showering. *Got all my sweat and blood all over it...*

Jonathan’s digging back into his seemingly endless multi-purpose closet, this time dragging a chair over to reach the top shelf. He jumps down a minute later, a puffy, plum-colored blanket under his right arm.

“Here you go,” He says, dumping it on the bed. “I’ll take the floor.”

Steve starts shaking his head but it sends his mind spinning so he immediately stops. “No, I will.”

“Steve, you’re not really in a position to argue with me,” Jonathan says smugly, settling up a spot on the floor.

Steve is too dizzy to argue and instead slips off his socks and, after a moment’s hesitation, the shirt too, before finally laying down on the bed, pulling the blanket up to his chest.

“In the morning...I...wake me up before...” he mumbles, not sure what he even means.

Jonathan goes over to the door and locks it with a chuckle. "It's okay. No one messes with me when my door is locked. I've hammered the message home over the years. Now we just need to hope that Will doesn't spill the beans," he says with a smile, turning out the lights.

And suddenly Steve feels vulnerable and very much awake in the darkness of the room. A few minutes pass with him trying to calm his racing heart to no avail. *What the fuck is wrong with you, man?*

Jonathan is still moving around, and Steve watches him as his eyes adjust to the dark. He goes over to the window and pulls it down, leaving it open a few inches, and then sets his alarm clock beside the bed, which is just inches from Steve's face. *I need him near me...*

"Jonathan..." he breathes, feeling his face heating up in embarrassment at his coming request. "Can you...can you sleep up here...?"

"Are you sure?" Jonathan asks quietly. "I didn't want to make you uncomfortable..."

"Yeah...please..." Steve feels a desperation that he's never felt before, to feel the boy at his side. *I need this, I need him here, right now...*

Jonathan walks around and carefully gets into bed, watching Steve the entire time. He brings up a blanket from his niche on the floor and settles in, turning to the older boy.

"Is this okay?"

Steve nods quickly, feeling somewhat reassured. His heart isn't pounding as furiously as it was but the anxious knot in his stomach seems to be resurfacing. He wishes he could flip over on his stomach which is how he always sleeps, or at least on his side, but his face can't handle it.

It's quiet for a while and Steve closes his eyes, the sound of his labored breathing, mingling with the gusting wind outside. He tries to calm himself down by taking deep breaths, focusing on the rise and fall of his chest, but it's not working.

FUCKING FAGGOT, FIGHT BACK!!

Steve's eyes fly open and he inhales sharply, releasing a moment later as his head is suddenly full of his dad's shouting...

Fight back, you FAG!! {Bang} I'M GONNA BEAT THIS SHIT OUT OF YOU, BOY!! {Punch! Punch! Punch!} YOU FUCKING COCKSUCKER!! {Smack!} My own son, A GODDAMN FAG!! FIGHT BACK, BOY, FIGHT BACK!! {Punch! Thump! Bang!} That son of a bitch really turned you into a fucking queer!! I'm gonna make you wish you never met that fucking faggot!! {Crack! Punch! Smack!} Gonna fuck you up until you grow some balls. FIGHT BACK, YOU IDIOT!!! FIGHT BACK!! FIGHT BAAAACK!!! {Punch! Punch! Punch! Punch!...}

Steve's hardly aware of his heartbeat tripling its speed, his hands gripping the blanket, his unsteady breathing... All he can see, hear, feel, and even smell, is his dad in those harrowing few minutes. The veins in his eyes, his face contorted in rage, the stench of alcohol coming out of his mouth, the abuse he's screaming, his bloodied fists...

"Jonathan," he hears himself croaking. He's sure the other boy is sleeping; it seems like an eternity since he lay down beside him.

But he's wrong. "Yeah?" Jonathan asks, hoisting himself onto an elbow to see Steve better.

Steve suddenly can't speak, his mouth opens and closes a few times but nothing comes out, or rather, nothing coherent comes out. "uh... I...mm...ca...yo...hm..."

Jonathan can see the sheer terror in the older boy's eyes and he decides to do something about it. Steve gasps as he feels Jonathan's hand settle on his chest, somewhere over his heart. It's rough but warm and instinctively, it seems, his hand comes up to cover it.

"Jesus, Steve...you're..." Jonathan mutters, feeling the other's heart rate. "You're okay, man. That's over. Whatever he did...it's over... he's not getting to you here..."

Steve can feel himself calming down as the other boy continues to soothe him. *Look at you, man...just look at yourself...you're a mess! You're such a fucking mess!*

"Whatever you do Steve, whatever he said...it's not you...it's him, okay? The self-loathing...it...it destroys you if you don't shut it up..."

How can this guy read my thought?

"...He's just a bastard, Steve. Nothing more. Any person who can do this to their son is just a piece of human trash...and he should be locked up...but just remember that you're okay here. You can stay here...you don't need to think about tomorrow right now. Just try to get some sleep..."

"Jonathan..." he rasps, turning his head to meet the other boy's eye, getting a bit distracted by his well-defined lips first. *Dammit, I want to kiss him!* "Thank you."

Jonathan doesn't brush him off like he expects him to, but rather nods and smiles slightly. "Yeah...I always wished I had someone on those nights, so I know how it is."

Steve nods and squeezes Jonathan's hand, feeling the chapped skin on the back of it. "This...this is the lowest point of my life, tonight. And you're...you're right here...I mean, you know how I usually am...I literally haven't cried in front of someone since I was like eight."

Jonathan chuckles, not in a teasing way, but softly, and a bit sadly. "I can imagine. I...I can't usually control myself...I mean, damn! I've even cried in front of Hopper...that was embarrassing..."

Steve finds himself interested. "Really?...that must've been bad. When was it?"

Jonathan sighs a long, drawn-out sigh. "Uh...at the morgue when we went to see Will. Or at least his fake body...I...I couldn't...I couldn't wrap my mind around it, and my mom...she was...well, she was right in the end, but at the time, it seemed like she was losing it." Jonathan exhales slowly. "I had to arrange the funeral myself."

Steve's eyes widen and he stares at Jonathan, feeling a new respect for the boy, who's looking down. "Jesus...like a fucking horror movie..."

Jonathan grimaces. “Yeah...complete with a monster and everything...”

He readjusts and removes his hand from Steve’s chest, lying back down, this time facing the older boy. Steve feels a sense of loss that he can’t explain. He needs that hand on him for some reason. He needs to feel something that’s not a fist flying at his face, something gentle and warm. He needs it, but he can’t ask for it. It was hard enough asking Jonathan to sleep near him, he can’t go and ask the other boy to hold him too, even though that’s what he wants so desperately that it hurts.

But apparently, he doesn’t have to ask for it. He nearly cries in relief when he feels Jonathan’s arm settle across his lower chest, the younger boy’s hand slipping around his waist, pulling him a bit closer.

“Is this okay?” Jonathan whispers just a couple of inches from Steve’s ear. Jonathan’s warm breath on his neck tickles Steve in a pleasant way, and he nods slowly, leaning into the other boy ever so slightly.

“Good night,” Jonathan breathes, sending goosebumps up Steve’s spine. He doesn’t trust himself to speak, so he remains quiet but nods his head, feeling himself relaxing already.

A couple of minutes later, his head is swimming again, waves of dizziness running through his muddled mind. He moves his hand to rest on Jonathan’s arm, almost subconsciously, somehow feeling the soft hair on the other boy’s skin under his fingers and taking strange comfort in it. Just before he drifts off, he thinks he can feel something warm and soft on his forehead, but he can’t be sure of it...

To Be Continued...

Notes for the Chapter:

I think I'm a bit of a sadist, torturing my characters like this... ; D

The big moment is ahead, thanks for reading!

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

Chapter 6, here it is! This was supposed to be the last, but, well...

Steve slowly wakes up. First, he becomes aware of his throbbing head, then his swollen face, then his aching ribs, then his shallow breathing...then a foreign weight on his stomach.

Wait...what?

He opens his eyes (well, one at least) and looks down to find an arm across his stomach. Almost in slow motion, his eyes travel up the arm, to the shoulder, finally settling on the face. *Jonathan. Right. Last night. Dad. My face. I cried. A lot. All over Jonathan. I'm wearing his boxers right now. What. The. Fuck. I need to get outta here!*

Steve sits up which causes Jonathan's arm to slip and his hand to settle on the older boy's crotch.

Oh, God! Oh, God!...Enjoying it, Steve?...Fuck, he better not wake up right now! Steve could feel himself getting hard, so he quickly slides Jonathan's arm off him, carefully, so as not to wake the younger boy. Suddenly, there are footsteps out in the hallway and then a light tapping, followed by a jiggling of the doorknob.

"Jonathan, are you up? It's 7:40 already!" Joyce calls in.

Everything's still for a second, and then Jonathan groans, his face buried in a pillow, before lifting his head an inch. He opens his eyes and glances around, staring at Steve blankly for a few seconds.

"Oh...." He mutters and then jumps into action. He springs out of bed, glaring at the alarm clock which failed to ring, and looks around at Steve who's sitting up and is a sight to behold. "Stay here."

"Jonathan..." Steve calls out, as Jonathan reaches for the door. "I...I just remembered, my car..."

“Where is it?”

“Right around the bend...” Steve mumbles.

“Okay, I’ll take care of it....keys?” Jonathan questions.

“Oh...um....right, they should still be in the ignition...”

Jonathan nods one final time and then slips out of the room. He returns ten minutes later to find Steve trying to pull on his sneakers and he stares, after closing the door firmly behind him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he finally asks after a solid minute of the two eyeing each other.

“Oh...um...I need to get going...school, you know....things....” Steve trails off seeing the disbelief evident in Jonathan’s face.

“Steve...you’re...you can barely walk!” Jonathan says coming over and sitting down on the bed. “You’re not going to school, you’re not going home...You’re going straight back to sleep. You got less than three hours.”

Steve doesn’t say anything and avoids Jonathan’s eye, uncomfortable. *Last night happened, man!...This is some super-awkward shit right here...*

“I hid your car in some bushes, so that’s taken care of...” Jonathan continues, getting up and hanging a dark sheet over the window. “And I don’t know about you, but I’m heading back to sleep...”

Steve caves and gets back under the covers, immediately relaxing into the warm bed and falling asleep before Jonathan can join him.

When he wakes up, there’s no one beside him and he feels kind of abandoned. *Aww...poor you. Get out of bed and stop throwing yourself a pity party. Maybe try to sort out what happened last night, eh...?* Steve doesn’t really want to think about last night’s events. Everything is a little mixed up in his head, but what does stick is Jonathan, and the way the younger boy was treating him, like he was one of his lost puppies. *We slept in the same bed. He practically held me as I fell asleep. He had his hand on my chest. My bare chest.*

Steve stands up, just a little unsteadily. *This is much better than last night...or was it this morning...who knows?* He grabs the flannel shirt that Jonathan had given him, now lying crumpled at the end of the bed, and puts it on, noting the new bruises that have materialized overnight on his arms and shoulders. He manages the buttons just fine, if a bit slowly, and looks around, taking a minute to think. The alarm clock now reads 12:13 and it's not flashing, so he assumes this is the correct time.

Steve sighs and opens the door, peeking out and looking both ways to see if the coast is clear and immediately being hit by the alluring scent of cinnamon, wafting down the hall. He makes his way out of Jonathan's room and into the kitchen, after a short detour to the bathroom, finding it empty, though there is a sheet full of cinnamon rolls cooling on the counter, which he has to restrain himself from scarfing down right there and then.

Steve briefly wonders if he's alone, as he helps himself to a drink of cold water, before wandering into the living room and spotting Jonathan lying on a couch, staring vacantly at the TV, whose volume is barely audible.

"Uh...good morning," Steve says, realizing how sheepish and sleepy he sounds.

Jonathan looks over, a smile tugging at the left corner of his mouth. "Afternoon, you mean. What a sleepyhead..."

"Yeah, well," Steve says, rubbing his left eye and letting out an almighty yawn. "Long night, you know..."

"Yep." Jonathan gets up slowly and looks at Steve. "Are you okay?"

Steve shrugs both his shoulders. "Yeah...kind of. Better than last night, that's for sure." The two boys gaze at each other for a long moment. *Are we gonna talk about last night?...Or do we just carry on, pretend it didn't happen...* Normally Steve would be heavily in favor of the latter, but now, he isn't even sure which one he prefers. *You want to talk about it, don't you? Well...the idea is kind of...tempting.*

"So what do you want for breakfast?" Jonathan interrupts his inner

conflict and drags him away from his fantasies.

“Oh, uh...anything really,” Steve says hastily. “I don’t care; though... those cinnamon buns do look good, wink, wink...”

“Help yourself,” Jonathan smiles, patting his arm, sending a jolt up Steve’s spine. *Okay....I am not imagining this...he can’t keep his hands off me...*

They relocate to the kitchen where, as usual, Steve sits down and starts stuffing his face while Jonathan gets to work. A few eggs are cracked, a couple of slices of bread are popped into the toaster, the refrigerator is opened and closed a few times...all in silence, as the temperature in the room seems to ratchet up, due to the unspoken.

“So,” Jonathan finally says, breaking the silence, and turning away from the eggs for a moment. “Can we...talk about you?”

Steve mentally breathes a sigh of relief; for a second there he thought the younger boy would bring up...*them*.

“Hmm?” he mutters, carefully avoiding Jonathan’s eye.

“What are you gonna do?”

“I...I don’t know,” Steve says, growing more and more uncomfortable. “I guess I’ll head home and go from there.”

“Steve...I was thinking...” Jonathan stops talking for a moment, sighs, and then begins again, with an effort. “Um...you could stay here if you want. I...I’m sure my mom wouldn’t care and...I doubt you want to go back home, given...you know...Me and Will can double up, you could get your own room... I know it’s not much, but...Just until you figure things out...I mean, only if...”

Steve gets up and walks over to Jonathan, who finally stops rambling.

He’s about to hug the younger boy when something...a slight twitch of the other’s mouth, changes his mind, or heart, rather.

Oh, fuck it! Steve leans over and presses his lips softly to Jonathan’s.

There's a split-second where he feels stupid and horrified at his move, but then it happens. Jonathan pushes back slightly, raising his chin to meet Steve's lips better.

I was right, Steve thinks distantly, *his lips are ridiculously soft for a guy*. He feels those gentle, inexperienced hands on him, one around his waist and the other curling through his hair, applying just the slightest bit of pressure. His chest seems to expand with warmth and his own hands move, to the nape of Jonathan's neck and the small of his back.

They pull away quickly, looking at each other, just inches apart, and then, as if agreeing on something, their lips meet again. While the first kiss was all nerves and butterflies, this one is quite different; this one is thrill and passion and need. Steve runs his tongue over the seam of Jonathan's lips hesitantly, wondering if the other boy will grant him entrance and pleased when he does. From there, it's all heat, and exhilaration, and tingling, and light-headedness...Their lips are barely touching anymore but their tongues are dancing around each other, eager for more, their mouths moving in rhythm, their hands clutching at one another...

It's not earth-shattering or life-changing, but it's perfect and everything Steve imagined it to be. Just him and Jonathan and nothing else. He can smell the other boy (vanilla and lemon and apples and yeah...sweat), and he can taste him too (coffee and toothpaste and cinnamon). He can feel Jonathan's arms and hands on him, his tongue and lips, their chests just barely touching...He can hear him breathing erratically, can feel the racing of his heart, can hear their tongues lapping and the soft click of each individual kiss...

After what seems like an hour, they break apart, flushed and breathing heavily, slowly removing their hands from each other. Jonathan immediately drops his head nervously but Steve reaches out and raises his chin, forcing the other boy to look at him. *I can do this now, right?...yeah, I guess you can...*

"I'll take you up on your offer, there's just one problem," Steve says, feeling giddy as he stares into those chocolate-brown eyes. *Fuck, I love this guy!* "I don't want or need my own room."

Jonathan's anxious face breaks into a grin and suddenly all the tension of the last twenty minutes disappears.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that," Steve says, a smile playing on his lips.

"I think I do..." Jonathan counters, falling back into their old routine. "If it's half as long as I've wanted to. I just didn't know if you..."

"Yeah...well, now you know," Steve smiles lopsidedly. He feels a sense of happiness that he didn't really know was possible. "I was gonna do it last night, but...that wouldn't've been too hot, would it?"

"Who said it was hot?" Jonathan throws out casually, turning back to his eggs, concealing a smirk. But when he turns back and sees Steve's devastated face, he can't help it anymore, and bursts into a fit of giggles.

"Fuck you, Byers...I felt your pulse going crazy..." Steve mutters, laughing as he throws his arm around Jonathan in a half-hug, half-headlock maneuver. "You burnt my eggs."

"Yeah, well. If you weren't busy distracting me, then maybe I wouldn't have," Jonathan shoots back, dislodging himself and dishing the charred eggs into a bowl.

"Guess I have to eat them, then," Steve says merrily, grabbing the bowl and sitting back down at the table. He's joined a few minutes later by Jonathan who drops a couple of slices of buttered toast into his bowl. They spend the next five minutes trying not to catch each other's eye, but failing miserably, and grinning idiotically as Steve polishes off his breakfast. Neither of them says a word, but unlike the previous period of silence, this one does not contain a shred of discomfort.

"Can I have some aspirin? My head is a little...off," Steve pipes up.

Jonathan jumps up and returns with the bottle setting down in front of the other boy, along with a cup of water.

The phone rings just as Jonathan opens his mouth to speak, and he hurries over to answer it.

“Hello...”

“Yeah, it’s me...”

“Um...yeah, he’s here actually, hang on...”

Jonathan turns to Steve clapping the phone against his thigh to muffle his voice. “It’s Nancy...she’s asking about us. Should I tell her? Do you want to tell her? Or should I make something up?”

Steve shakes his head, swallowing the second pill. “No, you can tell her.”

Jonathan puts the phone back to his ear. “Hey, so there was a...an incident last night...”

“Yeah, his, uh...his dad beat him.” Jonathan looks over at Steve and rolls his eyes, making a blah-blah-blah gesture, causing the older boy to smile. *Typical Nance to freak out...*

“Yeah, he’s here, he’s okay, I think...” Jonathan glances at Steve, eyes suddenly narrowed as if analyzing him. “No, you don’t need-“

“You can come after school, honestly.”

“Okay fine, fine, fine.”

“It’s in my locker. You know the combination.”

“Yeah, okay. Bye.”

Jonathan hangs up and turns to Steve. “She’s coming over. I left my car there yesterday, so yeah... You are okay, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m good. Still a little...” Steve raises his hand and makes a random motion at his head. “...still a little dazed, but okay. I know I look awful, though. She’s gonna go crazy, just watch.”

“So, I was thinking, do you wanna go to your place and pick up stuff?” Jonathan asks leaning against the wall and crossing his arms.

Steve hesitates and Jonathan jumps in. “I figured we should go

now...less chance of your...him being home.”

“Yeah, I guess we should...” Steve responds. “I just...whatever.”

“We’ll get in and get out quickly,” Jonathan offers, moving over to sit near him. “I’ll be there.”

Steve smiles and looks back at Jonathan wanting to say something, but Jonathan continues. “And we should go to the hospital today. Your face should be looked at, your ribs...you could have a punctured lung, for all we know.”

Steve shakes his head. “No, no. I can’t. No.”

“Steve, we can make something up. Say you got into a fight or something. I beat you up pretty bad,” Jonathan adds with a grin.

Steve avoids his eye. “I’m not going.”

“Fine, although I think Nancy will have something to say to that,” Jonathan says threateningly. There’s silence for a few minutes before he speaks again.

“You want to put some aloe on your face? We have something like that. It’ll cool it down.”

“Yeah, let’s do that. It’s starting to burn and sting again,” Steve says, getting up. They head to the bathroom, where Jonathan digs into the medicine chest and brings out a lavender and white tube that looks like some kind of moisturizer to Steve. He reaches for it but Jonathan has other plans. The younger boy washes his hands and squeezes a dollop onto his left one, turning to Steve.

“You ready?” he asks, lifting his hand.

“Um...yeah, I was gonna do that-“ But he’s cut off as Jonathan starts rubbing the stuff on, slowly and gently.

Steve feels himself blushing as Jonathan’s fingers continue to smooth the aloe over his cheeks. The other boy doesn’t, or pretends not to, notice his discomfort and focuses wholly on the task, as Steve begins to relax. *Enjoying....eh?*

Jonathan moves up to his forehead, smiling faintly, as if at some private joke, and their eyes lock. Steve becomes aware that the other boy's hand has stopped moving and is just resting there on his face as they stare at each other.

"You know, I was gonna kiss you last night too, when you started crying," Jonathan says quietly, holding the gaze. "I just figured it would hurt you too much."

The temperature in the room doubles at the comment and Steve has a hard time stopping himself from pinning Jonathan against the tiled bathroom wall and kissing him into oblivion. As it is, he's feeling kind of dizzy, having the other boy so close, staring at him so absorbedly. He notices for the first time, that in the daylight streaming through the window, Jonathan's eyes are closer to hazel, and there are green and yellow flecks circling his irises.

Steve leans in and kisses him for just a split second. "Yeah, well," he breathes afterward. "No need to hold back anymore."

"Did it hurt before?" Jonathan asks casually, resuming the massaging, his mouth twitching.

"Wouldn't know," Steve smiles. "I was, uh...otherwise engaged."

"...otherwise engaged..." Jonathan smirks, finishing up and washing his hands again.

"Yeah," Steve laughs, raising an eyebrow. "You're not a half-bad kisser, Jonathan."

He's met with that brilliant, shy, crooked smile that he can now enjoy fully, not having to worry about slipping up and saying something to give away his true feelings or those wild butterflies that seem to pop up in every organ he owns.

"What happened to 'Byers', huh?" Jonathan questions, drying his hands on a towel. "I guess we're on first-name terms now?"

Steve's about to formulate an appropriately snarky response when they both jump at the sudden pounding on the front door.

“Nancy,” Jonathan mutters unnecessarily, heading out to open it, Steve right behind him. He unfastens the latch and opens the door, revealing Nancy standing there, hands stuffed in her jeans and her face nervous-looking.

“Hi, don’t scream when you see him,” Jonathan says in greeting, standing aside. She walks in and immediately spots Steve.

“Oh God...Steve...” Nancy runs over and throws her arms around him tightly, but releasing him a moment later to size him up. “You look...really bad.”

“Thanks,” Steve smiles lopsidedly. “I know. But it’s not as bad as it looks.”

“Really?!” Nancy practically shouts, glaring at Jonathan for some reason, as though it’s his fault that Steve’s trying to underplay his injuries. “Not as bad as it looks...huh?! Because we’re going to the hospital right now. Come on.” And she grabs Steve’s hand, trying to drag him out the door.

“I can’t believe you didn’t force him...” She mutters at Jonathan in disbelief.

“Nancy, calm down...you weren’t here last night...” Jonathan says quickly. “Give him a minute, he’s not even wearing shoes.”

“So go put on some shoes!” Nancy cries out. “I can’t believe you Jonathan...” she says once Steve leaves the room.

“Nancy, with all due respect, you don’t know what it’s like, okay?” Jonathan says, a bit shortly. “He was freaking out last night, alright? He was...he was terrified actually. Sure, I could’ve forced him, but I wasn’t gonna do that. You didn’t see him, he wasn’t himself.”

Nancy finally calms down and sinks onto a couch. “Yeah, I’m sorry. You’re probably right. What do we do?”

“He’s staying here for now,” Jonathan says quickly. “I offered and he as good as accepted, so that’s that. And yeah, I want to go to the hospital too, I’ve got a plan,” he finishes off as Steve re-enters the room.

“So I was thinking,” He starts as the other boy sits down on the couch. “We could go somewhere out of town, maybe even in the city, that way no one would know you. How about it?”

“Yeah, fine. I give in,” Steve sighs. “You guys are not gonna let me off the hook, are you?”

“Nope,” Nancy says with finality, getting up again, offering a hand to Steve. He takes it, glancing over at Jonathan, who doesn’t blink. *Is this okay now?...I don’t know...there’s so much to sort out between us...*

That knot of anxiety is resettling in his stomach, his mind racing with so many obstacles and problems. *I shouldn’t have done that. I shouldn’t have kissed him. Everything is so messed up. I don’t have a house to go to anymore. I don’t have anything. I’m a fag, just like my dad said I was. I fucking love another guy. What am I doing? What have I gotten myself into?*

It’s getting harder to keep that smile plastered on, so Steve lets it slip off, hoping the others won’t notice the change or will choose to ignore it. Jonathan is looking at him funny and Steve is suddenly struck by an urge to get away from him. *What the hell man? The guy is your best friend and nicest person you’ve ever met, not to mention possibly being your boyfriend...* But it’s becoming too much, the way Jonathan looks at him. He’s never been looked at that way, so carefully and warmly and it’s making him claustrophobic. Jonathan seems to sense that something is wrong and heads over, causing Steve to go into real panic mode. But when the other boy’s arm slips around his back, it’s like all the worry and uncertainty becomes tolerable, and he releases a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding in.

“I was just freaking out a bit,” he admits to Jonathan before the other boy even asks. “I mean...I...I don’t know...everything is just happening so fast...”

“Can we go guys? It’s getting late,” Nancy interrupts looking at her watch.

“Yup,” Steve says, straightening up. “Let’s go. Although I’m wearing pajama pants...”

“We’ll stop by your place, you can change into something there,” Jonathan says quickly.

They make their way out of the room and out to the car. Automatically, Nancy gets into the front to drive and the boys, after a pause and a guilty shared look, pile into the back.

It’s less than ten minutes before they pull up to the Harrington driveway and get out of the car. Steve pauses at the door and wordlessly, Nancy takes his hand while Jonathan looks at him with those anxious puppy-eyes that automatically make him smile.

They go in and Steve’s eyes are drawn to the middle couch, a tan-colored leather piece, and he can distantly hear Jonathan gasp beside him. There are a few very conspicuous blood streaks running along the armrest that he knows must have gotten there when he’d tried to hide his face in the cushions, trying to shield himself from more abuse...

He feels Jonathan’s hand slip into his and he squeezes to let the other boy know that he’s okay.

“I hate this place...” he mutters finally with a sigh. “Can we get all of our stuff out of here? Fast?”

A fair amount of their possessions have amassed in the Harrington house over the last few months, namely some sweaters, records, and pictures. Nancy and Jonathan go to work downstairs, gathering up their things from various rooms, while Steve labors up the stairs and starts on his own room.

Jonathan walks in about ten minutes later to find Steve staring at a picture over his night table, a giant mountain of clothes on his bed.

“Need any help?” he calls out, startling Steve.

“Oh! I...I don’t know,” he yawns, standing up and looking around.

“Where do you plan on putting all this?” Jonathan questions, gesturing at the mess.

“I’ll need a suitcase, I guess...”

Jonathan wrangles the location of the suitcases out of Steve and hurries off, returning minutes later lugging a large green duffle bag and a smaller, black suitcase with him.

“So you can dump your clothes in here...we’ll sort it out at home,” Jonathan starts, setting the duffle bag down on the bed. Steve nods and sits back down, feeling a wave of nausea pass over him, just as Nancy walks in. Seeing what’s going on, she comes over and helps him pile everything in, zipping up the duffle bag which barely manages to close. Then she and Jonathan look at him expectantly.

“What else?”

Steve’s looking around the room at the many pictures and posters, a bit distracted. *I don’t want to leave them here...I want them. I don’t want dad seeing them, even...*

He gets up with difficulty and starts removing pictures from the wall, taking care not to tear them. “I want these,” he mutters as an explanation, not wanting to go into his strange reasoning. They don’t question him and start to help, chatting about the various pictures they’re taking down.

“Ha, remember this?!” Nancy says, holding up a blurry-ish photo of her and Steve sprawled out on an ice-skating rink. “I was awful...”

“Yeah, you kept pulling Steve down with you,” Jonathan adds, dislodging the stubborn edge of a picture featuring a silhouette of Nancy against the setting sun at the Hawkins lake.

“And you were just sitting there, eating ice-cream of all things...” Steve says in a fake accusatory tone.

“I didn’t want to break my foot, I’m uncoordinated as hell,” Jonathan laughs.

“Ah...here’s me at the Art Institute of Chicago, which you guys pretty much tricked me into going to,” Steve says, taking down a blown-up photo of him leaning casually against one of the lion statues outside the impressive building. They *had* tricked him into going. He’d been under the impression that they’d be visiting Wrigley Field, but no,

Jonathan had parked a block away from the damn art museum and they'd spent the entire day looking at freaky paintings. The one saving grace had been the Chicago deep-dish pizza they'd grabbed before heading home.

"Oh...I love that picture of you!" Nancy says, coming over to take a look. It is a good picture. His hair is in rare form, blowing in the wind, and he's wearing his varsity jacket and beat-up jeans, both the perfect contrast to the grandeur of the statue and building behind him.

Jonathan also walks over, leaning over Nancy's shoulder to see it. "Yeah...but there was a group of girls watching him, he was just trying to play it cool."

"No, I wasn't! I was bored stiff!" Steve says indignantly and points at himself in the photo. "That's natural charm right there. I understand if you're jealous, Byers...not everyone is as smooth as I am..."

Jonathan snorts and pokes Steve in the back. "I guess we'll just ignore the time you spilled that woman's drink all over her?"

"Wait, when was that?" Nancy laughs, taking down another picture; all three of them at the Morton Arboretum, arms flung haphazardly around each other, a leafy, winding path behind them.

"At that mall, I forgot where it was," Jonathan says quickly. "He thought he was being all gallant, handing it to her and then he went and spilled the thing all over her."

Nancy and Jonathan both burst out laughing and are soon joined by Steve who has to admit, it had been funny. But his laughs quickly turn into gasps and the other two immediately take notice.

"Hey, just sit down. We'll finish up," Jonathan says, putting a hand on his shoulder as he sinks down onto the bed. Steve doesn't protest and catches his breath, directing the others in the dismantling of his room. After the walls are mostly bare, and there's a large stack of photos lying on his desk, they turn to him again for further direction.

"Okay, I need to get a few more things..." he says with a bit of a

mischievous grin, getting up and walking out to the bathroom, grabbing a pair of jeans that he'd left out to change into. They sit down on the bed to wait for him, a bit bewildered.

Nancy looks around morosely. "You know, I have so many memories of this place. I can't believe...I don't know. I met his dad a couple of times. He didn't seem so bad."

"They never do," Jonathan says quickly, biting his nails and glaring down at the rust-colored carpet. "I wanna...I wanted to go to the police last night. You didn't even see him then, he was so much worse. He could barely walk...his speech was slurred...he was a mess."

"Well you did a good job then," Nancy says gently, taking his hand. "Does this...bring back memories?"

Jonathan nods, still not looking at Nancy. "I just...the blood down there..." he says, his breath shaking, as he inhales deeply. "I don't know. He'll...he'll be okay, though. He's actually tough underneath everything."

Nancy smiles tiredly, squeezing his hand. "I know he is. But don't tell him that...we don't need to inflate his head further."

Jonathan starts chuckling just as Steve reenters the room.

"What am I hearing about inflated heads? Surely you're not talking about me?!" He makes his way over to the bed and dumps a load of bottles and tubes onto it.

Jonathan picks one up and proceeds to burst into giggles, trying to read out the label. "Maverick hair...hair thickening...hair thickening mousse...irresistible scent...she'll love...oh God..."

"You're never gonna live this down," Nancy says, trying to hide her own smirk.

There's a slight blush to Steve's cheeks as he responds. "Well, laugh all you want. At the end of the day, who has the best hair in town?"

"I don't know, but it's certainly not you," Jonathan chortles, still bent

over laughing.

“Oh really?! Is it this?” Steve says, reaching out and taking hold of a clump of Jonathan’s disheveled mop, playing around with it a bit. *Yeah, it’s way better and softer than yours. You love it...speaking of which, maybe you should leave go...this is starting to get a bit weird, you playing with his hair...*

Jonathan’s barely paying attention, grabbing a black jar and reading the label aloud again. “Grooming Cream...what the hell is that?”

Steve makes a grab at it. “Grooming, Byers,” he says curtly. “Or have you never heard of that?”

“Ha ha ha. There’s grooming and then there’s grooming cream...” Jonathan counters. “Important distinction...”

“Okay, you guys can stop flirting,” Nancy calls out, getting up.

Their heads whip around so fast that they both clamp a hand on their necks, trying to massage the cricks they’ve just given themselves.

“Don’t look so surprised...” Nancy grins. “I only spent the last five months with you guys. Anyone with eyes, or ears for that matter, could tell there was something up.”

Jonathan’s face is a deep shade of pink, while Steve actually looks kind of thrilled. “Okay, good, we don’t have to... Are you o-“

“Of course I’m okay with it! Why wouldn’t I be? Honestly, you guys are damn cute,” Nancy says looking down at them, sitting side by side on the bed.

Jonathan looks up, kind of horrified. “Urg...cute...?”

“Uh-huh. Especially you, no Steve?” Nancy turns to look at the older boy, who’s grinning softly at Jonathan.

“Yeah...adorable. He’s got dimples for heaven’s sake!”

Jonathan shakes his head and gets up, huffing under his breath. “Cute...huh...ridiculous...cute...”

“Even cuter...” Steve says loudly, leaning back against the pillows and closing his eyes with a sigh.

“Steve...are you okay?” Nancy asks quickly, laying a hand on his arm. “Come on, let’s get outta here,” she says turning to Jonathan. Steve sits up carefully and gets up.

“Got a few more things here...” he mutters, dragging the suitcase over to his closet and piling some stuff into it.

“Records...I’ll try my best to improve Jonathan’s musical taste,” he says, turning around and catching Nancy’s eye.

“Oh no. No, no, no...” Jonathan says, shaking his head vehemently. “We will not be playing any of your trash in my room.”

“We’ll see about that...” Steve says, slipping some...sensitive items into the suitcase when he’s sure the other two aren’t looking. *Got plans, eh?...who knows...who knows?*

He finally finishes and zips up the suitcase. “Okay, finished. Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

Jonathan looks at him with a suffering expression on his face. “Let’s blow this...Oh man, these next few weeks are not gonna be fun.”

“Don’t be so sure...I’m a fun guy, Byers. There’s always action where I’m at.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of...”

“I like nice, quiet evenings too, I can do those,” Steve says quickly, giving Jonathan a suggestive wink.

The younger boy actually raises his hands and clutches at his hair. “Gah! What did I get myself into?”

“You’re so funny when you’re dramatic...” Steve smirks, lugging his suitcase to the door, where Nancy is waiting patiently. Jonathan quickly hurries over and wrests the handle from his hand.

“You shouldn’t carry this,” He mutters, going into protective mode

and slipping out of the room ahead of Steve. The older boy gives one last look around his bedroom and then closes the door behind him, not looking back. Their little procession heads downstairs, Nancy in the lead with the duffle bag, Jonathan, with the suitcase, and Steve bringing up the rear, his footsteps heavy on the padded carpet, as he grasps the railing for support.

They stop at the entrance where Jonathan goes and picks up a bag of stuff that he and Nancy have gathered and then they turn to leave.

The other two are out the front door when Steve turns back one final time and feels a lump in his throat, rising quickly. The tears are falling before he can stop them and he grips the doorpost, to steady himself, staring at the blood-stained couch.

It's a couple of minutes before he feels what can only be Jonathan's hand on his shoulder. He turns away, wanting to hide his tears, but Jonathan doesn't let him and forces Steve to face him.

"Let's go, Steve," he says softly, holding his gaze. "Nothing good's gonna come from staying here."

"Yeah," Steve mutters, his head involuntarily being dragged back to the grisly sight of his own blood. *That's me, right there...in my own house, by my own father...*

He allows himself to be dragged away from the door and led back to the car by Jonathan. Nancy's looking at him sympathetically as he stumbles into the car followed closely by the younger boy, and she speaks up after they're settled.

"So, I've been looking at this map, and I think I found a place. It's like fifty minutes to an hour from here, should be good. What do you say?"

Steve nods and sniffs, leaning back and closing his eyes. He feels Jonathan moving beside him and then the younger boy presses a couple of tissues into his hand. Steve smiles at him weakly and stuffs them into his pocket.

"It's okay. Don't need them."

Jonathan nods solemnly and moves a little closer to him so that they're shoulder to shoulder. He slips his arm around the other boy and grips his waist slightly, as Steve watches him, a little woozy. He wants to bury his head in the other boy like the previous night, he wants to hold him and be held, but he doesn't want to appear too needy and desperate. Harringtons didn't need love. Nor did they need to be hugged, or touched in any way for that matter.

They drive for a few minutes until Steve loses his patience and puts his head down on Jonathan's shoulder. *There. That's better...*

The other boy doesn't blink and leans his own head in a bit, his cheek coming to rest on Steve's head, sinking into his ample hair. Steve feels Jonathan's fingers moving on his waist, caressing him lightly. It tickles for just a second, but then he gets used to it and relaxes, thinking about it. *It's actually happening...finally. Those hands are on me...Feels a lot better than I thought it would...Bet you can't wait for something more...intimate, shall we say?...Can't wait to run your hand all over him?...*

The idea alone send a jolt of excitement straight down to his crotch and he has to fight off the thoughts popping into his head to avoid a supremely embarrassing situation. Smiling slightly, he begins to drift off, nuzzling his face a bit, into the soft fabric of Jonathan's t-shirt. *This is nice...*

The car is quiet for a good half hour, Steve's breathing filling the enclosed space. Nancy keeps glancing in the rearview mirror at the two boys, and alternating between smiling and staving off tears. After another ten minutes, she turns back to Jonathan.

"Hey, so we're nearly there..." Her voice is barely a whisper and he blinks in response, lifting his head deliberately as if coming out of a trance.

"Yeah..." Jonathan mutters. He's pretty uncomfortable but doesn't want to move and wake Steve up yet. They're driving along busy city streets, horns honking, cars cutting in front of them, people yelling, walking, talking...

Three minutes later, Nancy pulls up in front of a sprawling, six-story,

ivory building and stops the car.

“Okay, here we are. I’ll look for parking, you get him in, alright?”

Jonathan mumbles something in agreement and shakes Steve awake.

“Hey, we’re here...”

Steve rubs at his one good eye and scrambles uncoordinatedly out of the car after Jonathan.

“Hang on, don’t I need ID or something?” Steve says, hand on the car door.

“Oh...yeah, do you...?”

“Yeah, I packed my wallet in the suitcase, let me get it...” They go around to the trunk and retrieve Steve’s wallet. A moment later, Nancy drives off and the boys head into the hospital and make for the emergency room.

“Oh shit...” Steve groans, seeing the chaos unfolding before him.
“We’re gonna be here all day.”

“Doubt it. Half these people are probably waiting for someone. Come on...” Jonathan grips his arm and leads him over to the desk. They check in and settle down for the long wait, joined ten minutes later by Nancy. They sit mostly in silence, Steve not really being up to his usual jousting, and observe the hustle and bustle that is the emergency room.

Steve is keenly aware how Jonathan keeps his hands off him completely. Not even a pat on the back or a brush of the shoulders. *Guess it’s best this way...* The younger boy does keep glancing at him, though, making sure he’s alright.

How can I be so miserable and so happy at the same time?!... Steve thinks, grabbing at his twinging ribs.

It’s past three when they finally call his name and the three of them get up and follow the nurse into an examination room.

“Okay, who are you two?” the nurse, Bianca, according to her name

tag, asks, turning to them.

“Friends,” Nancy answers quickly.

“Well, Steven’s got to change, so if you can please step outside...?”

They leave the room, glancing nervously at each other, wondering how many uncomfortable questions they’ll have to deal with. Steve gingerly gets into the gown Bianca gives him. *Not too bad, at least I can keep my pants on...*

The other two are let back into the room and then the questions start:

“Can you tell me what happened, Steven?”

Steve takes a deep breath, glances at the other two and then begins. “Uh, I got into a fight. At school. And, as you can see, I got hammered...” He flashes a Steve Harrington Grin™, hoping to charm her into submission, but it doesn’t seem to be working.

“And when did this happen?” Bianca presses, clipboard at the ready.

“Uh...” *Shit! She can tell these bruises are not from today...*
“Yesterday...”

“Yesterday? So why are you only here now?” She’s looking down at her notes, trying to put him more at ease, and her tone is laid-back as opposed to accusatory, which Steve appreciates.

“Uh...you know...I didn’t think I need it, but these guys,” he points at Nancy and Jonathan, “Forced me here today. They seem to think my lungs are permanently damaged, maybe I’ve busted a few arteries... possible brain damage...”

“That’d be pretty hard to tell,” Jonathan mutters under his breath.

“How about your parents?” Bianca says, smiling to herself. “Where are they?”

“They’re not in town. They travel a lot...” Steve says quickly, his heart speeding up. It’s not a complete lie; his mom is out of town. *Now we get to the heart of the matter...*

“Are they aware of...”

“No. I can’t reach them and besides...we don’t have the best relationship,” Steve says, deciding that a little honesty would further his case. “So, you know...these guys are a lot closer to me than my parents are.”

“Okay, I get it. I ran away at sixteen. You’re seventeen, right?”

“Yeah, I’d love to lie about my age, but the ID kinda gives it away...” Steve admits, grinning. “Is that gonna be a problem?”

“We’ll see. Depends on what you need. So what’s bothering you?”

“Uh...” Steve looks around at the other two for support. “Well, my face is fucked up, obviously. And...breathing’s been a bit off, chest hurts pretty bad too.”

“I think he has a broken rib, a concussion, and possibly a collapsed lung,” Jonathan adds. “And, yeah, maybe something for his face...to prevent infection.”

“Alright, any health problems we should know about?” Bianca continues, running down her checklist.

“Nope. Picture of health right here.”

“Do you smoke, drink, do drugs...?” she follows up, glancing over at him.

“Check, check, and no. I smoke all the time, drink weekly or so, and have never done drugs,” Steve answers truthfully.

“Okay, the doctor will be with you shortly,” Bianca smiles at them and leaves the room.

Steve immediately turns to the others. “So, what do you think? Am I in trouble?”

“Nah, she was okay...” Nancy says, moving to stand beside him, where he’s sitting on the examination bed. Jonathan is still keeping his distance, though he offers a reassuring smile in response to

Steve's query, sitting hunched on a chair in the corner.

He's about to ask if they can get something to eat when a lanky, fresh-faced doctor walks in. Immediately, he strides over to Steve and offers him his hand.

"Dr. McEnroe," he says, his voice kind of high-pitched for a guy's.

"Steve," Steve responds, not too sure if he likes this guy or not. "Jonathan, and Nancy," he adds, gesturing around at the other two teens in the room. Dr. McEnroe nods at both of them and then turns back to Steve.

"Okay, let's get on with this...Do you want them to leave the room, or..."

"It's okay, I prefer they stay..."

"Alright then..." Steve lays down on the bed and the doctor pries open the gown to examine his chest, keeping up a running commentary: "So, how did this happen?...Ooh, nasty piece of work, right there!...What did you do to annoy this guy?...Does this hurt?...How about this?...Breathe deeply, please...that's it, just like that...What did you put on this?...How did you sleep last night?..."

Eventually, he moves on to Steve's face where he pokes and prods a bit, checking the swollen eye carefully.

"Okay, we'll need some x-rays done to see if you've got a collapsed lung and check on your ribs..." Dr. McEnroe concludes, getting up. "If you'll follow me..."

Steve heads out of the room, grinning goofily at the others and returns, accompanied by a nurse, a good half an hour later, a little less brash.

"So, it turns out he's John McEnroe's, like, fifth cousin," he says, sitting back down.

They both ignore him and Jonathan walks over from where he was sulking in the corner, glaring at the clock. "Well...?"

“Well what?”

“Your lungs?!”

“Oh, I don’t know...he’s examining the x-rays now.”

Jonathan sits down on the bed beside Steve and Nancy settles down on the other side.

“How do you feel?”

“Okay,” Steve glances around at the nurse who’s watching them curiously. She quickly turns away and busies herself with something none of them can figure out, and they lower their tones significantly.

“Okay!”

They all jump as Dr. McEnroe bounds back into the room enthusiastically.

“Aha, I’ve got three patients now!” he jokes pathetically, looking at all three of them hanging out on the bed. But Steve apparently finds it funny and lets out a loud guffaw.

“I see how the two of you get along...” Jonathan mutters, glancing between the two of them. “That was terrible...”

“Hey, go easy on him,” Steve insists, nudging Jonathan.

“Alright,” the doctor continues, pulling up a chair and sitting down, holding a stack of x-rays. “I’ve got good news and bad news.”

“Bad news first,” Jonathan says automatically before Steve can respond.

“Well, you’ve got a collapsed lung and two broken ribs. But, neither are too severe, so here’s what we’re looking at: You don’t need to stay here, no chest tubes or needles...you just need rest and lots of it.”

Steve nods and he continues. “How’s the pain?”

“Not too bad,” Steve says quickly. “I mean, my head hurt worse than

my ribs yesterday...”

“Okay, I’m gonna prescribe some painkillers...nothing too strong,” Dr. McEnroe says, whipping out a pad and scribbling something on it. “And I’ll also give you something to use on your face and chest...it should help with recovery time and prevent infections.”

“Alright...” Steve says, yawning.

“Okay, now let’s talk about recovery. You’re gonna need to take it easy. That means no school, no stress, no exertion, mental or physical, got it?”

Steve looks a bit like Christmas has come early as he smiles at the other two. “Well, I’ve got doctor’s orders...no work for me...”

“Business as usual, then,” Jonathan deadpans, not even looking at Steve.

Dr. McEnroe smiles and plows on, over the laughter from the teenagers. “Okay, there’s more...you should wear loose clothes, normally you would want to wrap your chest to help the ribs recover but that’s a no-no because of your lungs. Make sure to get plenty of sleep, at least 8 hours a night, and drink a lot. Also, no driving for a week, minimum. Get one of these two to chauffeur you,” he says gesturing at Jonathan and Nancy.

“Right on, Doc,” Steve says, giving him a tip of an imaginary hat.

“Make sure to shower and clean those abrasions, to ensure they don’t get infected. You can also apply ice to your face and ribs, it might help with the pain. But again...lots of rest and relaxation. Make sure you eat right, too, that always helps. You should schedule an appointment with your doctor, or come back here in a week or so, just to make sure that your lung is doing okay, and if you feel anything getting worse, you should get yourself checked out again.”

Steve nods his understanding, but the doctor isn’t done.

“One more thing and you’re not gonna like this; no smoking.”

“Ah, Shit! I knew there was gonna be a catch...” Steve grumbles,

shaking his head in disbelief.

"Yeah, well, you're gonna follow that," Nancy says with finality, grabbing his arm and looking at him. "Right?"

"We shall see," Steve replies mysteriously. "Is that everything?"

"Yeah, just need you to sign these forms...You should be back to yourself mentally within a week, but physically it may take quite a while." Dr. McEnroe hands him a few papers and he goes through them, not really paying much attention to the writing. *Who reads these things anyway?*

"Alright, that'll be it...you can change back into your clothes...here are the prescriptions, you should be able to fill them fairly easily."

"Okay, thanks man," Steve says, taking the slips of paper being offered.

"Yeah, take care," Dr. McEnroe replies, venturing to put a hand on Steve's shoulder, and looking him in the eye. "If this guy does something like this again, you may want to consider taking it to the police..."

There's something in the doctor's gaze that makes Steve realize he isn't referring to some punk from school. *Dammit, is it that obvious?*

"Yeah, sure, who knows?" he says quickly, smiling easily with a shrug. "Say hello to John for me..."

"I told you, I've never even spoken to him," Dr. McEnroe says, shaking his head, smiling. "Take care of him," he adds, glancing at the other two, before leaving the room.

"He knew," Steve says once he's clear, slipping out of the gown and retrieving Jonathan's flannel shirt.

"Yeah, he probably did," Nancy agrees, folding the gown for some reason, and laying it neatly on the bed. "He had the decency not to mention it, though, so--"

Just then, Bianca walks back in. "Oh, all done? Well, you can leave

whenever you're ready."

They troop out of the room and the hospital, onto the busy city streets, Nancy in the lead, guiding them to the car.

To Be Continued...

Notes for the Chapter:

This was supposed to end at night, but it was just stretching out, so I stopped here.

Thank you all for reading, appreciate the support!

<3

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

This is a bit shorter than the last couple of chapters, but I hope you like it...

“So,” Nancy starts, once again behind the wheel with the two guys in the back. “Where to?”

“Pharmacy,” Jonathan says immediately, staring out at the passing people, his cheek pressed against the window. “We don’t want to fill this stuff in Hawkins. The whole town’ll know what’s up by morning if we do.”

“ Yeah...” Steve rolls his eyes. “Phil MacDowell can’t keep his fat mouth shut...remember when he blabbed about Cribbs’s ED meds?”

Nancy can’t help a laugh escape as she eases the car out of the cramped parking space she’d managed to squeeze into. “Oh God, that was funny...Even my dad couldn’t stop laughing.”

“So where is the closest pharmacy?” Nancy mutters, half to herself, half to the boys, once she’d calmed down.

“No idea...ask someone, I guess,” Steve says in response, settling into the squashy seats and rolling the window down. At the next red light, he spots his target and bellows out to the street. “Hey, man! YO!”

Jonathan looks over from his side to watch the show just as a guy glowers at Steve, holding onto his two kids protectively. “Are you talking to me?”

“Yeah, do you know where there’s a pharmacy in these parts?” Steve yells out the window.

The guy visibly relaxes and walks a couple of feet over. “Yeah, you’re gonna drive straight to Redmarch, that’s five/six blocks down, make a left there, then one street later, make a right onto Brandor Avenue...should be a Walgreens in the area.”

"Alright, thanks, man. Have a good day!" Steve calls out, rolling the window back up, the beeping behind them starting up as the light turns green.. "You heard him, left on Red-something or other, and then a right."

Nancy chuckles and races off. They slow down in front of the Walgreens, just as a silver Camaro pulls out, and snag the prime parking spot immediately. The three of them burst in and head to the back to fill the prescriptions, encountering just the slightest bit of trouble from the obnoxious girl manning the counter, who looks barely 16.

When they leave the pharmacy, Steve's eyes are automatically drawn to the Baskin Robbins at the corner.

"Hey guys," he starts, grabbing Jonathan who's already making for the car. "How about it?" He points out the shop as if it's a castle or something; an opportunity not to be missed out on.

"It's late Steve, we gotta get back," ever-practical Nancy says.

"Oh, come on! I haven't had ice cream in weeks. And you know how I shut down without my ice cream..."

Jonathan looks like he's ready to give in, but Nancy is still skeptical so Steve decides to go all out. "Come on, Nance. It'll help me feel better. The cold...you know. My face is still burning."

"Oh...fine, sure. Let's go," Nancy relents, giving him a sympathetic look. Jonathan shoots Steve an impertinent glare, which Steve shrugs off with a grin. *It worked*, he mouths at the other boy.

They troop into the shop, Steve in the lead, suddenly feeling fine and full of energy. There's a considerable line, though, so he plops himself down at the bar seating, against the window, his legs swinging beneath him.

"Really?" Jonathan mutters, making his way over. "You couldn't have taken a normal table?"

"I like sitting up here," Steve says, trying to appear cool while looking like an overgrown baby. *Dude, the only people who sit up here*

are five-year-olds and tween girls... And me... Yeah, and Steve Harrington...

“What a dork...” Jonathan says, giving voice to his thoughts. But he hoists himself up beside the other boy. “So what do you want? Nancy’s holding our place.”

“My usual, man. Pumpkin Pie. Large.” Steve says jovially, handing Jonathan a twenty.

“Oh, right. I forgot... Pumpkin Pie, I mean, seriously? Out of all their flavors, you choose Pumpkin Pie...?”

“What’s the problem with that?” Steve questions. “Do you want me to go with vanilla or chocolate? That’s for bores like you. What are you getting anyway?”

Jonathan looks away and doesn’t answer.

“Really?!” Steve jumps on him. “I thought we’ve cleared this up already.” *Shit, we’re gonna do this again...*

“You know I hate taking money from people...” Jonathan mumbles, picking at his chapped hands.

“Okay, but at what point do Nancy and I get beyond being ‘people’... It’s like you can’t get over the idea of receiving anything...” Steve says, a little miffed. “You still call that camera mine, because I paid for it! Like, really Jonathan, have you never heard of a gift?!”

Jonathan is quiet so Steve presses on. “Besides, like I keep telling you, I eat half your food anyway, so that more than makes up for the two or three dollars we spend here...And now that I’m staying at your place, it’ll be a lot more. Come on, Jonathan...don’t be so... so...”

“So what?” Jonathan glances up at him, his cheeks slightly flushed.

Oh no, did I piss him off? Time for some damage control... “I don’t know what I mean,” Steve says hastily. “Just, let us do something for you once in a while.”

"Fine, I'll get a smoothie, happy?" Jonathan says, hopping down off the stool and frowning at Steve who grins widely.

"Yep, I am," he says, letting the next swing of his leg hit Jonathan in the thigh. "But it would be nice if you were too. You're stressing me out, and that's bad for my health, remember?"

"You're an idiot," Jonathan mutters, turning away, but Steve can swear he sees a slight smirk beginning to form on the other boy's lips.

"You know, I've heard that so many times from you and Nance that I already consider it a term of endearment," Steve says before Jonathan can get away.

"Ridiculous," Jonathan huffs, hurrying off to Nancy who's nearly at the counter.

They all settle down around Steve's bar-stool and stare at the passing pedestrians for a few minutes in silence, working on their ice cream/smoothie. When a large group of teenagers walks in, they take it as their cue to leave and head out to the car. The drive back to Hawkins is much louder than the drive into the city, as Steve seems to have regained his edge and spends the entire ride planning a pillow fight which Jonathan strongly opposes.

"Aren't you supposed to be resting?" he finally asks, as they're cruising along Elm. "I'm pretty sure throwing pillows at me is not considered R&R."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong. You have no idea, Byers," Steve says wisely. "I'm getting all relaxed just thinking about it."

"Okay, guys," Nancy says, coming to a stop outside her place and turning around in her seat. "I...Steve..." she begins but can't finish and gets out of the car, coming back to open up the door where Steve is sitting. He gets out of the car and leans against it, looking down at the girl who's become a sort-of sister to him.

"Hey," he grins, trying to ignore her glistening eyes.

"Steve...you're..." Nancy can't finish again and instead envelops him in a bone-crushing hug that literally takes his breath away.

"I love you...you'll be okay," she whispers, once she pulls away, giving him a kiss on the cheek. Jonathan comes around to take the driver's seat but Nancy grabs him in a three-way hug that he can't get out of.

"Don't kill each other, okay?"

"Don't worry, Nance. Byers and I get along swimmingly now."

"Oh yeah, just fetchingly, ravishingly even..." Jonathan jokes once they break apart. "Seriously Steve, 'swimmingly'?"

"If you can't handle my superior vocabulary, then we got a problem," Steve says airily, running a hand through his hair.

"Okay, this never ends..." Nancy says, giving them a look. "Good night guys. Call me."

"Yeah, we will," Jonathan says hurriedly. "Can you see if Will's here and send him out if he is?"

"Sure, g'night,"

They watch Nancy as she makes her way up the pathway to the brightly-lit Wheeler house and lets herself in. Steve absentmindedly reaches into his pocket, looking for a cigarette.

"Shit!"

Jonathan looks over. "What? Something hurting?"

"Yeah, my poor lungs are begging for some nicotine," Steve replies, dead serious, his face screwed up in pain as he clutches his chest.

"Maybe you want nicotine patches? We still have some from the last time my mom tried to quit," Jonathan offers, half-heartedly.

Steve waves him off. "Nah, those don't work, which you pretty much know if your mom's tried them."

At that moment, Will trots out of the house and runs over to the car.

“Hi, guys!”

“Hey, little man,” Steve answers when he reaches them, giving him a fist-bump.

“Get in,” Jonathan orders, wasting no time.

Will does and leans into the front where the other two have settled in. “So, what’s going on with you?” he asks eagerly.

“Staying by you for now,” Steve answers quietly, feeling a little self-conscious suddenly.

“Yes!” Will pumps his fist in triumph. “This is gonna be fun.”

“Glad someone thinks so,” Steve grumbles, looking pointedly at Jonathan. “Maybe I should share a room with Will...he seems a lot more enthusiastic.” *Ha! No way in hell...*

“Yeah, he’s about the right age group for you,” Jonathan smirks, speeding down the familiar roads on autopilot.

“Is your brother always this grouchy? He’s like a 70-year old crabby guy who just wants his paper and coffee...” Steve says, leaning back to see Will, who giggles.

“Yeah, he is,” Will laughs unbuckling the seatbelt to lean forward and whisper in Steve’s ear. “He’s actually really excited. You know, he likes you, like, in that way.”

“You’re kidding,” Steve says conspiratorially, playing along. *Little does the kid know...*

“Yeah,” Will grins, leaning in again. “I caught him looking at pictures of you a while ago. Just sitting on his bed and staring at them...”

Steve genuinely grins at that one. *There’s some news...I’ll be sure to use it on him.* He looks over at Jonathan and falls quiet at the serene look on the other boy’s face, focused on the road but obviously far away from the stretch of asphalt in front of him.

They arrive at the house at half past six where Jonathan and Will

haul the suitcases into the former's room and the elder Byers starts dinner. Any of Steve's attempts to help are waved off by the other boy so he settles himself on a couch, listening to Will chattering as he does his homework.

"Hey Steve," Jonathan calls out after twenty minutes or so. "Come here."

Steve hauls himself up from where he's drifting off again and lumbers into the kitchen where Jonathan is standing over some sautéing vegetables.

"Yeah?"

"So...my mom's gonna be home soon. We gotta figure out what we'll tell her."

"Ah. Right," Steve grimaces, poking a fork around the frying pan, over Jonathan's shoulder, and spearing a red pepper. *Forgot about that...wouldn't it be nice if it was just us three guys here?...*

"I think we should just tell her. I mean, she should know and also, she'll see right through any excuse we give..."

Steve nods. "Yeah...yeah, but can you—"

"Yeah, I'll tell her," Jonathan smiles at Steve as he chomps down on the pepper. There's something different about the smile that sets it apart from all the ones he's directed at Steve throughout the day when they were out with Nancy; it's softer and his face relaxes fully. *It's like he saves his real smile for when we're alone...* The thought sends a pleasant streak of warmth through his chest and abdomen and Steve finds himself grinning.

"Hmmm...it's good," he says, swallowing the pepper. "Although, it could use a tad more cayenne."

"Ha, look at you! A couple of months ago, you didn't even know where the spices were located," Jonathan says, reaching into the cabinet for the cayenne pepper, following Steve's directive.

"I've had a good teacher..." Steve grins, picking a potato out of the

pan and popping it into his mouth.

“Hey! Get outta here, go lounge around or something instead,” Jonathan says, slapping his hand away playfully.

“Righty-o.” Steve heads back to his spot on the couch and drops down, burying his face in the cushiony back and trying not to think of the blood-stained couch back home. Moments later, the latch on the door jangles and it opens.

“Hey guys, I’m home! Mmm...something smells good...” Joyce doesn’t spot Steve on the couch right away and Jonathan hurries in, taking her handbag off her and setting it down.

“Hi, how are you?”

“Good...today wasn’t too bad, I-“ she trails off, catching sight of Steve.

“Yeah, Mom, can we...talk?”

Steve tries to make himself invisible and doesn’t turn around, preferring to play dead than face Joyce. *What a coward...just turn around and say something...* But by the time he musters up the courage, she’s followed Jonathan out of the room. He can hear Joyce exclaim a couple of times but can’t make out what she’s saying and then, all too soon, she’s back in the room and heading his way.

“Hey, Joyce,” he calls out over-enthusiastically, embellishing the greeting with a wave as he gets up. She’s asked him to call her ‘Joyce’ about fifty times yet it still sounds funny on his tongue.

“Hi, Steve,” She says coming to a stop in front of him and hugging him. *Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry, you idiot, don’t cry ...*

“Jonathan told me,” she says, pulling away and holding his face between her hands, which are quite cold. “Now listen to me... You’re free to stay here as long as you like, as long as you need to, as long as you want to, okay?”

“Yeah,” he smiles, not trusting himself to say much more. “Thanks.”

Then, much to Steve's horror, she leans up and kisses him on the forehead. "How're you feeling?" She asks afterward, one hand still lingering on his cheek. "You look kinda out of it."

"I'm okay..." he grimaces, willing her to leave him alone. *Shit! Why does she have to be so...motherly?!* "Jonathan's a good nurse."

"Yeah, he is," Joyce chuckles, letting go of him at last. "We all have experience with him."

"Yeah," Steve echoes, unsure of what to say to that. Thankfully, Joyce seems satisfied and leaves the room, allowing him to come back to himself. *Whoa...this is not gonna be as easy as I thought it would be.*

"Hey Will!" he hears Jonathan call from the kitchen. "Can you give me a hand out back?"

Steve sinks back down on the couch, watching the little guy race into the kitchen. Hearing the screen door slam, though, he heads over to investigate, finding the brothers out back, fumbling with the shed door. They prop it open with a stone and disappear inside, prompting Steve to cross the yard and poke his face in.

"What's going on here?" he asks curiously.

"Getting your bed," Jonathan says like it's the most obvious thing. Sure enough, Will moves aside a couple of boxes, revealing the scratched metal frame of a folding bed.

"Oh, right," Steve says finally. *I hadn't thought of that... I kind of assumed...assumed what, eh?* He knows exactly what he'd assumed but doesn't want to acknowledge it at the moment. "I'll get the doors."

They lug the contraption into Jonathan's room, clearing some clutter that lines the walls, and setting it up, forming an L shape with Jonathan's bed. It's cramped, and his shelves, desk, and night table are now boxed in, but it works.

"Okay," Jonathan pants, wiping the sweat off of his forehead with his arm. "Let's eat."

Dinner passes a bit quietly, or at least that's how it seems to Steve. Jonathan doesn't say much, Will prattles endlessly about the bobcat that Dustin swears he spotted in the woods behind his house, and Joyce listens and comments. He minds his own business, feeling like an intruder, despite Jonathan's, and really, all of the Byers', best efforts at making him feel welcome. *It's not them...it's me*, Steve realizes, swirling his spoon around his plate distractedly, his head resting on his free hand. *I feel pathetic crashing here, for whatever reason. They're happy here, they don't need another problem, they've had enough of those...*

"Steve!" He looks up and finds Will staring at him.

"Oh shit...sorry...I was just...thinking..." Steve mumbles, looking around, suddenly aware that the meal appears to be over; Jonathan's doing the dishes and Joyce is no longer in the room.

"So do you wanna watch *Dynasty* with us?" Will presses, bobbing eagerly, as he always seems to be doing.

"Wait," Steve turns in his chair to see Jonathan. "He's allowed to watch *Dynasty*? This pipsqueak?!"

"Yeah...he and my mom enjoy that stuff," Jonathan mutters over Will's protestations, scrubbing at a pot, the sleeves of his green, henley shirt, rolled up. Steve has quickly learned, in the last few months, that Jonathan wears way fewer layers in his house than when out. *Damn! He looks good in that and he doesn't even know it...*

"Hey, do you or don't you wanna watch?!" Will asks, grabbing his arm and forcing the older boy to look at him.

"Yeah, sure, why not? What happened last week, do you remember?"

"Yeah, Kirby tried to kill Alexis and Mark blackmailed her..." Will says, dragging Steve into the living room and setting up a couch for the two of them, piling on the pillows and blankets.

"Don't you usually watch this with your mom?" Steve questions, though he collapses onto the cozy mound of pillows.

"Yeah, but now you're here," Will says, matter-of-factly, throwing a

blanket over the two of them and snuggling in. “Besides, she usually falls asleep halfway...”

Steve spots Jonathan smiling at the two of them, before disappearing into his room. “He never watches?”

“No,” Will says, giving Steve an exaggeratedly fatigued look accompanied by an embellished sigh. “All he likes is sci-fi and war movies. Weirdo.”

“Well, to be fair, you can’t actually blame him for disliking soaps...”

“No, but he doesn’t like anything on TV. He hates everything new, all he watches is old movies,” Will says animatedly as an anti-drug commercial plays.

Steve snorts, reaching for the chips that Will brought in. “Typical... like I said, he’s a grumpy old man.”

Joyce walks in a couple of minutes later and does a double take at the sight of them. “Well, never mind the mother, I guess...” She says, feigning offense, but smiling as she settles down on one of the comfy floral armchairs. Will laughs a bit, but then jumps up, runs over, hugs her, and hurries back to the couch, putting out the lamps on the way. Steve finds himself relaxing and humming along as the opening theme plays, drumming out the beat on the armrest.

By the time the show finishes, though, he’s yelling at the TV, while being shushed by Will.

“My mom’s sleeping, Steve. Be quiet.”

“But did you see that?! They killed Mark! We need his mustache, man!”

“Who do you think killed him?” Will asks, deciding on a different tactic to shut Steve up and moving to the kitchen.

“Obviously Alexis, she’s an evil bitch!”

“I don’t know, I feel like that’s too obvious...”

“Who else could it be?”

“Maybe Blake, he’s already killed someone. And technically it *could* have been an accident...” Will reasons.

“Nah, you’re just trying to outsmart them...”

They go back and forth for a while until Will gives in and heads off to take a shower. Steve knocks on Jonathan’s door and walks in, finding the other boy in bed, reading, the same as the previous night, in that same damn sleeveless undershirt.

“Hey,” he says, sinking down onto the bed, trying hard not to stare. Jonathan’s hair is wet and, for the first time that Steve can remember, not in his face but swept back. *Damn! He’s got killer cheekbones! I never realized how...sexy he can be...who knew?*

Jonathan puts his book down and, finding Steve staring, immediately brushes his hair back to its usual state.

“What’re you reading?” Steve prompts, shaking himself out of his reverie, and picking up the book.

“Mists of Avalon. It’s pretty good.”

“So you’re not a fan of *Dynasty*, huh?” Steve continues, settling further into the bed.

“No, although I know there’s a gay guy named Steve Carrington in it.”

Steve’s jaw drops and they both burst into a fit of laughter, that doesn’t seem likely to ever stop.

“I never even realized that, you know?” Steve gasps, his whole body shaking with laughter.

“Yeah, surprised no one at school picked up on it...” Jonathan giggles. *That giggle...* It drives Steve crazy in a good way. *Hey, I can finally say something about it!*

“I love when you laugh for real,” Steve says when they’ve calmed

down. "It's...different. And nice."

Jonathan bites his lip and becomes very interested in smoothing his sheet suddenly, much to Steve's chagrin. *Ah, time to backtrack...he's a real newbie to this stuff... it's too early in the night for heavy conversation.* "Anyway, I should probably go take a shower."

"Can't. It just started up," Jonathan says, gesturing at the opposite wall. Sure enough, now that Steve listens, he can hear the shower going.

"Ah...shit! How long does Will take?"

"Not long, though sometimes he can get sidetracked and take forever," Jonathan says, smiling. "The way to know is to listen at the door. If he's singing...then you better find something else to do."

"I'm on it." Steve slips out of the room and presses his ear to the bathroom door. "Dammit."

"He's belting out 'You Are My Sunshine'..." Steve reports to Jonathan, flopping down spectacularly on his own folding bed.

"You're finished then...he's really getting into it. You could go pound on the door if you want," Jonathan offers, slipping lower on his bed, getting more comfortable.

"Nah, I'd rather not get on his bad side so fast. What do you usually do all night?"

Jonathan shrugs. "Read. Music. Watch something maybe... occasionally do some homework, work a couple of nights...nothing special."

Steve nods and looks around for something to occupy himself with. Jonathan's desk is a jumble of papers, photos, records, pencils, and bits of duct tape, for some reason.

"I cleared a couple of shelves for you," Jonathan comments, watching him. "And a drawer."

Steve swivels around and checks out the closet, which is indeed home to two empty shelves. "Oh...thanks. I'll get on that." By the time he finishes emptying the contents of his duffle bag onto the shelves, the shower is available and he snags it, taking his time and having to stop himself from singing. When he gets out, it's past twelve, and Will's already in bed. Jonathan, though, is up and about, whistling, of all things.

Let's freak him out! "Ahem," Steve interrupts, leaning against the wall, arms folded domineeringly.

Jonathan jumps and spins around, flushed. "Oh...damn, you scared me."

"That was the point," Steve grins. "Anyway, do you have a laundry bag I can use for my things? I prefer to wash my own stuff." *This is uncomfortable...*

"Yeah, sure." Jonathan fetches one quickly and Steve dumps his things in, hauling the bag into their room. "You know how to do laundry?" the younger boy questions, raising an eyebrow.

"Uh...yeah. Learned at about ten. My babysitter taught me." *Here we are again, talking about my messed up family life...* But Jonathan just nods and goes quiet.

"So, uh," Steve begins loudly. The iller at ease he gets, the louder he tends to talk. "When do you usually go to sleep?"

"One-ish. Twelve is early, two is late," Jonathan supplies quickly.

"That sounds about right..." Steve mutters. "Do you wanna call Nance? We said we would."

They call her and exchange good-nights; Nancy reminding Steve to take his meds and Jonathan promising to pick her up the next morning. Then the moment Steve's been dreading arrives; they head to bed. He strips down to some shorts and snuggles under the same fluffy plum blanket from the previous night while Jonathan gets under the covers in plaid pajama pants and an undershirt. After consulting with Steve, he turns on the lamp and continues reading,

while the other boy stares at him. *God...I wish I could join him. That's all I want.* After a while, Jonathan puts his book down and starts gazing dully at him, leaving Steve staring back, getting nervous. *What's this? Did I do something wrong?*

A moment later, the younger boy shifts all the way over on his bed, rolling his eyes, and nodding at the spot near him. Too fast, Steve gathers up his blankets and makes his way over.

"Lock the door, while you're at it. The last thing I need is my mom walking in on the two of us in bed together."

Steve laughs and complies, feeling a little dizzy. "Was I being that obvious?"

"Uh...yeah. Those desperate eyes..." Jonathan shoots back, turning the lamp off.

"Do you always wear this much to bed?" Steve questions, turning on his side to face the other boy.

"No, I don't," Jonathan says truthfully, his expression unreadable.

"Well, no need to overdress on my account."

"Idiot," Jonathan breathes, smirking. "You know, I *will* kick you out of my bed if you don't behave yourself. And this is only because you're..."

"Because I'm a mess?" Steve asks sharply. The room goes deathly quiet; even the sound of the chirping crickets seems to be muted. *Shit! You really had to go ruin that moment with your stupid, insecure self?*

"No...I...I didn't mean that," Jonathan says finally. "You're not a mess."

"I know I am, Jonathan," Steve mumbles, avoiding the other's eye.

"Well, fine. You are. But you have every right to be. I wouldn't be any better off," Jonathan says quickly, playing with his hands for some reason. "You're tough. Nancy thinks me telling you that would

inflate your head too much, but you could probably use it.”

Steve chuckles hollowly but it quickly dies out and they spend a long while just looking at each other in the moonlight. Before they know what’s happening, the two of them are kissing again and this time, Steve can swear that it’s Jonathan who initiates it. It’s sweet and short, with not many hands involved because those are being used to prop themselves up, but it means a lot to both of them.

“And what I meant was that I care about you,” Jonathan breathes when they’ve separated. “Mess or not. I just want to see you happy. Really happy. Not the bullshit you fake.”

“Ha, same here,” Steve smiles, trying to lighten the mood. “Except for the faking part, you don’t bother with that.”

“Why should I?” Jonathan says seriously. “That’s another thing. I always wonder why you bother so hard pretending. It’s like you’re scared about anyone asking you what’s wrong, you want to keep people at bay, at a safe distance.”

Goddammit! This guy can read me like an open book! What the hell? And I thought Nance was good...

“It’s not weak to feel awful. Took me a long time to realize that, but now I do. And it’s not weak to cry either,” Jonathan mutters, almost to himself.

“How do you...” Steve starts, not bothering to finish.

“Because I’m like that too. Different reasons, probably...but it’s really the same thing.”

“What are your reasons?” Steve presses, not really expecting an answer.

Jonathan smiles sadly and shrugs. “I...I’m not really ready to...” he trails off, shaking his head and in that moment, he looks so vulnerable that Steve is hit with a powerful urge to hug him and never let go, which he resists. *Don’t go crazy on him...he’ll freak out.*

“Whenever you *are* ready, I’ll be there,” he says instead. *Good line,*

man...extremely cheesy....well, I meant it... And Jonathan seems to appreciate that. The younger boy reaches out a hand and squeezes his shoulder for a moment.

Why is his hand trembling?...Am I that scary?...And why is he looking at me like that?...I'm not that great.

"Thanks..." Jonathan mumbles. "Means a lot, just to hear that. Aside from my mom, I never have. And as much as I love her, I always wished I had someone else because that's not really enough. It's probably because she's family. You know...you feel like they're obligated to love you. They never actually chose you, though."

Steve is quiet and Jonathan lays a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize...I...you don't even have that."

Steve smiles in response, patting the younger boy's arm. "It's okay. You're a damn good consolation prize."

"Oh, is that what I am?" Jonathan laughs, letting out a yawn afterward. He lays down, bringing his blanket up to his chin and snuggling in. *I wish we were at the cuddling point*, is all Steve can think as he does the same. After a minute, Jonathan breaches the foot and a half that separates them and fumbles for Steve's hand.

"Is this okay?" he asks, closing his warm, rough palm over it.

"Yeah," Steve says groggily. "More than okay."

Jonathan smiles tiredly and adjusts, digging deeper into the mattress. "Good night, then."

"Yeah, g'night, babe."

It slips out by mistake and Steve watches through half-closed eyes as Jonathan freezes and his eyes widen in surprise. But he relaxes a short while later and Steve drifts off with the image of a small, hesitant smile playing on Jonathan's face. *Boyfriend...my boyfriend's face...*

To Be Continued...

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanx for reading as usual, <3

little note, I don't usually give teasers, but Tommy shall get his comeuppance next chapter :P

8. Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey, there.

Need to start off by apologizing.

I kinda got into another fandom and abandoned this work. Also haven't replied to your comments, sorry for that :(

But I wrote this piece and it's just been sitting here, so I thought, hey, why not just publish it?

Steve wakes up past ten the next day, stiff and sore, but his mood lightens when he finds the note Jonathan left for him on the bed.

Hey Sleepyhead

Hope you had a good night...

Pancakes on the second shelf. blue bowl. just warm it up. bread's in the oven. You can make your own eggs lazyboy. Won't be able to blame me if they burn (I hope they do)

I'll be home before three

Steve smiles but is a bit dismayed at the lack of any closing. *What were you expecting, eh? An expression of undying love?...Well, a little something would've been nice...Dude, you freaked him out. You called him 'babe', for Christ's sake!*

He drags himself out of bed, dressing haphazardly and making his way out into the hallway, but not before noticing how Jonathan dumped his blanket on the other bed. *Smart guy...I wouldn't have thought of that...gotta keep up appearances...* The house is empty, as he expected it to be and he wanders around, as he eats his breakfast. *Four hours left...* He decides on some exploration to kill time and works his way through the house, taking mental notes, and trying not to feel creepy while doing so. *These shelves here hold pretty much everything...washer is out back, on the screened-in porch...shockingly, Will's the one with the 'No Trespassing' sign on his door...*

Steve whiles away the remaining few hours, eventually ending up outside on the front porch, drinking some hastily-prepared lemonade. Jonathan finds him there snoozing when he comes home.

“Hey,” he pats the older boy’s head, messing up his hair. “I’m home.”

“Whamnsghsjshf,” Steve mumbles, blinking in the sunlight. “Oh, good. I’m going crazy here.”

The next day passes in much of the same way...Except that Jonathan leaves to work after an early dinner, and Will heads to the Wheelers for the night. Steve tries to make himself as inconspicuous as possible with just him and Joyce around, but it’s to no avail.

“Steve, can we talk?” she asks, peeking into Jonathan’s room, where he’s fiddling around with the other boy’s record player.

He jumps up and follows her out to the kitchen, his heart pumping nervously. Following Joyce’s lead, Steve sits down at the table, across from her.

“How’re you feeling?” she begins, taking out a cigarette and lighting it, while he looks on jealously.

“Okay,” he mumbles, trying to avoid her eyes. *Avoid the eye, avoid the eye...if you don’t look at the eye, then chances are you won’t cry....wow! I’m a poet and I didn’t even know it!...Focus, idiot, she’s talking to you. You happen to be staying in her house...*

“Are you sure? Nothing hurting? Nothing getting worse? I kind of feel responsible for you. Are you sure you’re okay?” She takes a long drag, gazing at Steve intently.

“Yeah...” Steve says, managing a smile. “I’m doing much better. Things are getting better.”

Joyce nods and falls quiet for just a moment. “But you’ll tell Jonathan if something doesn’t seem right?”

"Yeah, sure." Steve brushes a few stray strands of hair out of his eyes. He hasn't cut it in a while, and it's getting quite long, almost mullet-like.

"Steve, can I be honest with you?"

Her tone is dead-serious, and, with an effort, Steve pulls his eyes away from his socks and faces her. "Yeah?"

"I'm pissed. Correction, I'm fucking pissed," Joyce says, her jaw locking, not a shred of humor in her eyes. "Is this a recurring thing?" she gestures at his face, which is home to a mixture of scrapes, cuts, and black-and-blue marks. Luckily most of the swelling has dissipated and he's regained the use of his right eye but it's still nasty looking.

"No," Steve says, squirming. *She just cares, you moron!...can't you get over that?*

"Is that...the truth, or are you just trying to get me off your case?" Joyce smiles a bit, to temper her words.

"No, it's true. He's..uh, he's never done anything like this. We even used to get along," Steve says seriously, trying his hardest not to get emotional.

"Well, that makes it even worse..." Joyce mutters, almost to herself. "What about your mom? Where is she? Does she have a fucking clue?"

There's something in Joyce tone that seems to put him at ease and he finds himself spilling more than he intends to. "No. She doesn't. I have no way to reach her, and even if I did, she wouldn't give a fuck. She'd pretend to, but...yeah. She's not around. She never is. Always tramping around the world, going to parties and stuff. I don't even know what she does, but it's like, anywhere but here, anywhere but at home."

"What a goddamn little bitch..." Joyce huffs, taking another drag. Then, as if realizing that Steve is still listening, she hastily continues. "Oh, shit! That wasn't meant to be out loud."

But Steve laughs. "No, no. That's exactly what goes through my head

every time I think of her. She's pretty much on the same level as my dad; I hate her."

"I'll bet you do. I don't think a woman has any right to go running off if they've got a kid, and I have zero respect for one who does," Joyce says emphatically. "A guy can run, a girl can't. The dad obviously shouldn't run either but...that's another story."

Steve nods, getting more and more envious of that cigarette that Joyce keeps working on. She notices him looking and apologizes, tossing it out shortly afterward.

"Did Jonathan tell you anything about our history?" she asks suddenly.

Steve shrugs. "Not much, he's very....you know..." he makes a motion with his hands, bringing them together. "You know..."

"Closed?" Joyce offers with a smile. Steve nods emphatically. "Yeah, he is. Anyway, I'll take a few liberties, that he'll probably hate me for, but no need to mention it..."

Steve grins in agreement.

"So back in high school, I was kind of a slut," Joyce begins, pulling no punches. Steve's jaw drops a bit, but he quickly regains himself and listens in, rather interested. "I would bang guys, right and left, I had so many affairs in high school, I can barely even count them... And this had nothing to do with a dysfunctional home; we were perfectly normal...I had two parents...they were okay. I was just an idiot, a rebel, whatever you want to call it. Anyway, long story short...I got pregnant, had to figure out whose it was. All the fun and games came to an end. I had to get married, because in those days... you know, it was unheard of. Lonnie didn't seem so bad to me then. At least he wasn't one of those suit types, that's what I remember thinking. Turns out, that was the fuck-up of my life. He...he was...I honestly can't say he was the worst thing to ever happen to me because I got my two boys out of him, but..."

Joyce smiles at him and he smiles back jauntily, rather mystified. *Why is she telling me this?*

“Things got pretty nasty around here...We didn’t have an easy time. I made a lot of mistakes, mistakes that were pretty costly. Jonathan... Jonathan didn’t have an easy time, of anything...”

Steve notices the tears welling up in her eyes and averts his gaze for a moment as she collects herself.

“But that’s for him to...My point is, Steve, we’ve been through a lot and we understand. Really understand. I’ve noticed that you’re uncomfortable around me, and it’s just... please don’t be. I’ve been there and done that; I’ve seen it all. It’s really okay, you staying here. I’m used to having boys around, another one doesn’t make much of a difference. Will’s friends are always welcome too...So, you’re free to crash here as long as you want, whether it’s a week, a month, or a year, really. I don’t give a damn, as long as you’re not around that son of...”

Steve finds himself chuckling and Joyce watches him, expectantly. “What?”

“It’s just funny how you have two choir boys for sons when you...”

“When I’m so fucked up, huh? No, it’s okay,” Joyce adds hurriedly, seeing Steve’s rueful look. “I honestly don’t know how I ended up with these two, but God, I’m happy I did! It’ll be nice to have you around, though. I love the two of them, more than anything, but... they can get a little too...”

“Nice?” Steve suggests with a smirk, thinking of Jonathan.

“Yeah. They’re just too sweet sometimes. I literally have to coax them to curse every so often,” Joyce laughs. “It just doesn’t seem normal to me... We’re so different, and they certainly didn’t get that soft side from their father, so...I don’t know.”

“Should I turn Jonathan into a bad boy?” Steve suggests slyly.

“Don’t you dare!” Joyce says with a smile. “You’d have a chance with him, though. Will, forget it. But Jonathan’s got a dark side...”

“Yeah, a right old brooder, isn’t he?” Steve jumps in. *This is a fun topic...* “He can be fine one day, completely depressed the next.”

“Yeah...” Joyce answers, a little distractedly. “He...like I said, he didn’t have an easy time as a kid, and that’s the understatement of a lifetime.” She looks at Steve curiously and he has the feeling that there’s something big that she’s wondering if he knows. “Just...he’s... he’s never been very comfortable in his own skin. You two are good for him. He’s really a different person now. Smiles more, laughs more.”

Steve nods, imagining Jonathan smiling, and feeling the warmth creeping up his neck. “Yeah,” he mutters, playing with the spare button on the inside flap of his shirt. “He’s a good guy; you should be proud. I was a little shit before I started hanging out with him.” *Imagine having this kind of conversation with Tommy’s mother!...Imagine having any conversation with Tommy’s mother...*

Joyce smiles at him and Steve notices how her eyes crinkle up the same way Jonathan’s do. “You’re sweet, you know? Going soft too?”

Steve blushes furiously and grumbles something in response. *Your friend’s mom just called you sweet! What the hell, man?...What happened to Steve Self-Centered Harrington?... Time for some light talk, don’t you think?*

“Well, like it or not, here I am. Jonathan’s gonna have to do some extra cooking for a while,” he grins, leaning his chair back on two legs. Joyce just laughs and pats one of his hands which are gripping the table to steady himself. She doesn’t jump down his throat about how he’s breaking the chair like his mom would. She doesn’t even mention it. “I’m gonna get fat if I stay here for too long. I need my beach body for the summer.”

Joyce snorts, getting up, and Steve realizes that she’s more like a friend to him than anything else. “There are barely any beaches in Indiana...”

They go back and forth until Jonathan gets home. He looks surprised to see the two of them laughing it up together, but pleased, like the divide between them had been weighing on his mind too. Later on, after Joyce turns in for the night, and with no school the next day, significant at least for Jonathan, the two boys hang out on the front deck, sharing a beer.

“So. Let’s hear about those couple of times you got high...” Steve says, after a pleasant lull in the conversation. It’s cool but humid enough not to be chilly and the sky is clear, the moon not much more than a bright sliver in the sky. Jonathan looks at him in surprise and he chuckles. “Yeah, I remember. How could I not? Angel like you, getting high...”

The other boy smiles slightly but Steve can see his eyes wandering, in the dulled light emanating out of the dining room window.

“Just...only if you want to, you know...” he adds hastily.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Jonathan says after a pause. “First time was at, like, ten. I ran away for a night. Hung out at the park, there were a couple of guys there who offered me some. They were decent guys, actually...” he trails off, lost in thought, but continues speaking after a few seconds, with a slight shake of the head. “Second time was in, uh, seventh grade, forgot how old I was then...twelve probably. Anyway, remember Eddie Hicks?”

“That shithead?! You knew him?” Steve asks, his jaw dropping in surprise.

“No! Course not,” Jonathan laughs, slapping Steve playfully on the arm. “The police were after him and he went and dumped his stuff on me. Didn’t even look at me; he was just running and stuffed it down my shirt, told me to keep my mouth shut if I wanted a head attached to my body.”

“No fucking way!”

“Yeah...It was like a solid twenty to thirty grams of pot...I was just surprised it wasn’t meth or something like that.”

“Why didn’t you turn it in? Scared of him, or...?” Steve questions, getting up and moving his wicker chair closer to Jonathan’s.

“No. Like I said, he wouldn’t have been able to find me,” the younger boy says, fiddling with the empty beer can, putting a few dents in it. “I kept it because I felt like shit and, you know...wanted to have that. I smoked just once though. Got good and stoned...” Jonathan has a

dreamy look on which scares Steve a bit. *Doesn't look like himself...* "It was nice but I swore not to do it anymore, threw the rest out and haven't done it since." He finishes up and looks over at the older boy, a frank expression on his face. "I briefly considered selling it, but then imagined my mom if I got sent to juvie."

"Jesus..." Steve manages, looking at Jonathan as if for the first time. "Not such an angel after all, huh?"

Jonathan shrugs and looks off into the creepy shadows of the treeline. "We didn't have much money then. Not to say that we do now, but that was right after the divorce, so...things were really bad. Just wanted to make a buck and I couldn't get a normal job at that age. Does that make me a bad person?" His tone is defiant as if daring Steve to apply in the affirmative.

"No. Fuck, no! You wanted to help your mom out!" Steve says adamantly looking at Jonathan warily. "If that's not a good reason then I don't know what is. Besides, it was weed, not some shit like heroin."

"Yeah...well, I felt pretty low just considering it," Jonathan says, glancing at Steve for a split second, before becoming fascinated with the night sky, and starting to bite his nail aggressively.

"Don't," Steve says shortly, settling an arm around the younger boy's back, squeezing his bicep. Jonathan leans into him, just barely, and Steve can feel his tensed back relaxing as the seconds pass.

"So, what about you?" Jonathan says eventually. "You ever get high?"

"Surprisingly not," Steve chuckles, turning his head to look at the other boy who's not looking at him. "Although I started smoking pretty young. Tommy got me into that, in like eighth grade. Can't blame him though, because I'm still doing it and that's my problem."

"Steve Harrington...taking responsibility for his problems. Now I've seen everything," Jonathan mutters, grinning at him. Their faces are inches apart and Steve notices how Jonathan's grin softens into a smile, how his breathing becomes heavier. *Damn...*

“Anyway, yeah...and the first time I got drunk was also the first time I hit on someone,” he adds when they break eye contact. Jonathan’s head snaps back to him, his eyes cautiously questioning, as if unsure whether Steve intends to talk about it or not. “I wasn’t even fifteen yet. It was at my cousin’s fucking birthday party. Evan’s. You know him. So yeah...booze, girls, the whole package. She was older, like 17/18, I don’t even know. Kept eyeing me the entire party and then it just happened.” *Are we actually talking about this...?*

“So, yeah...it’s been downhill ever since, in regard to that stuff. It was kinda awful, I was much too young,” Steve says, shaking his leg restlessly, and trying to appear indifferent. *The fuck?! Why are you telling him this? Trying to make things more awkward than they already are? Why, the hell, are you bringing up sex with him?!!*

Jonathan doesn’t seem fazed though and merely gives Steve a soft, lopsided smile. “Well, don’t expect me to share the details of my sexual encounters because I don’t have any.”

Steve shrugs, biting back a smile. “Hey, still better than bad ones.”

Jonathan glances at him, his mouth open just the slightest bit, about to say something, but then he clamps it shut as if deciding that it’s safer not to. Instead, he weaves an arm around Steve’s back his hand sneaking in just under Steve’s armpit.

The older boy squirms, giggling. “That tickles, man!”

“Oh, sorry,” Jonathan mutters, not sounding very apologetic and moving his hand down a few inches, settling on Steve’s waist.

Steve suddenly feels a lump in his throat which he fights down by swallowing hard and blinking rapidly. “Hey, do you mind if I...” he starts, gesturing towards the other boy’s shoulder with his head.

Jonathan just smiles tiredly and raises an eyebrow. “There’s no one around, is there?”

Steve grins and settles his head down on the younger boy’s shoulder, which is quickly becoming his safety blanket. “You’re really comfortable,” he mutters, his voice muffled. The only response he

gets is Jonathan's head coming to rest on top of his and the hand on his waist gripping him a little tighter.

If only I could just stay here, until, like...I'm 18, or something...or maybe 40, that would be nice too.

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't plan on continuing this work, but if anyone would like to take over, feel free to message me.